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MANU S PILLAI ON RAVI VARMA

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'I DON'T GET AWED BY THE TRAJECTORY OF MY LIFE'

An interview with Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he completes two decades in public office

BY PR RAMESH

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EDITOR'S NOTE

only books magazine

S PRASANNARAJAN

THE POWER OF PURSUIT

Twenty years ago on October 7th, when Narendra Damodardas Modi was sworn in chief minister of Gujarat, India was a different place, shedding the weight of its political inheritance to reveal a great impatience. It was not exactly the end of the Congress century, though the fadeout could not have been missed in an India that was daring to disengage from the enforced behavioural codes of the socialist-secular state. The prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was the sobering face of a profound change, and naming it was a challenge as old vocabularies that defined who we are for so long were getting redundant. And the prime minister himself, languid and laconic till the poetry rushed in, chose the moderation of a reconciler as he ruled the minds of the converted as well as the non-believers. Modi, brought in from the periphery of the apparat, moulded by the textbook ethos of the *parivar*, started his job without the benefit of baggage—and exaggerated expectations. They looked different: the laid-back philosopher king in Delhi and the neophyte in Gandhinagar, united by a movement that a part of India still preferred to misread and separated by style, the lyrical flourish of one and the lacerating flamboyance of the other. One would succeed in preserving his individual aura even as the mandate slipped away; the other would risk both the personal and the political for the inviolability of his faith, his fight, and the mandate he wouldn't let go. Modi in power began his journey in an India that was still not sure of its politicians' worth in safeguarding the grail; he would witness fellow travellers falling by the wayside, as reminders of what it would take to manage freedom; and he would refuse to deviate from the path to please or placate, for in this journey he alone held the semaphore.

Twenty years on, he looms over an India where change is not an uncertainty, but still a national conversation without a definitive conclusion. The debutant of the early aughts is the tallest tower in Indian politics today, and the defining motif in all the narratives, euphoric or alarmist, we construct about the future. Then, back in Gandhinagar, when he took the first steps of one of politics' most eventful journeys, he was a lone figure in the family that quite often mistook ideology as a ticket to a mythologised past, maybe a logical extension of the *rath yatra* metaphor; in Delhi today, as the singular custodian of change, the struggle he enjoys most is all about balancing the cultural agenda—the restoration of the civilisational Hindu and his gods—with the modernisation of an unequal India. It's being played out in a space where a new set of the sacred, the nation and its regained identities, is at play, and he alone seems to enjoy the authority—and authenticity—to be its sole supervisor. Governance has a pronounced cultural

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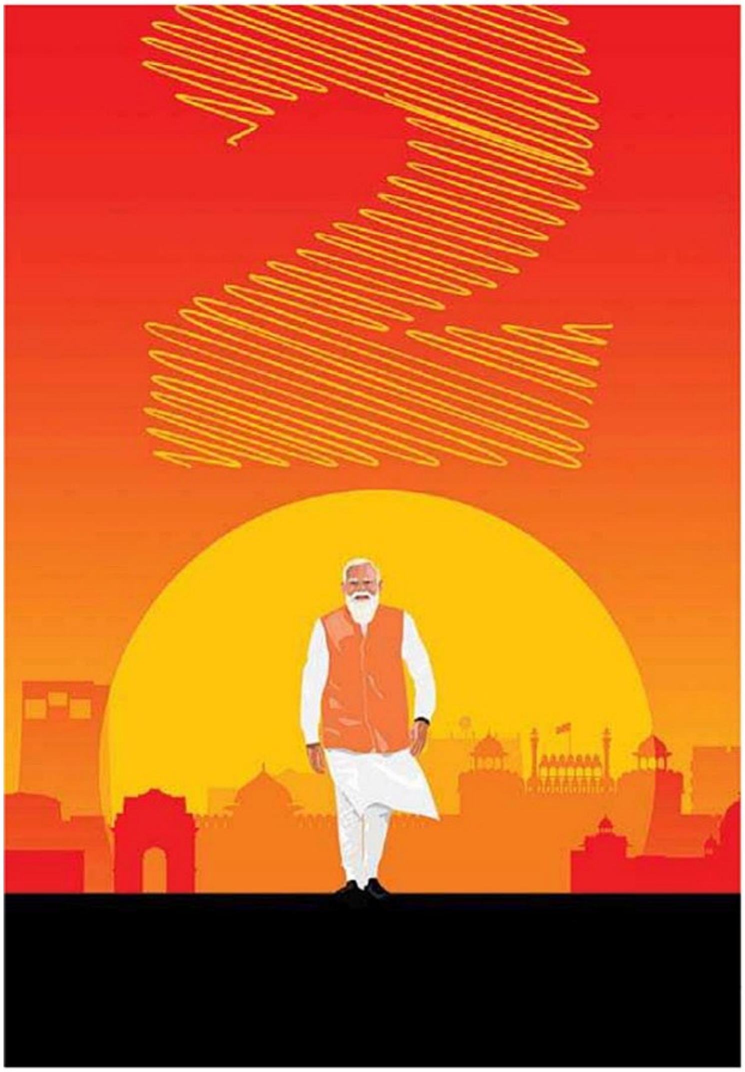
Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**



accent—it's Nation Building with a Capital N.

To reach here, Modi took the loneliest of journeys in politics, and perhaps the longest if we take a politician's journey as a campaign with the clarity of destination. In the beginning, the adversity of Gujarat 2002 tested his mettle—and hardened his faith in the larger story—larger than Gujarat—of being himself in his own party, still wallowing in defeatism, and beyond. The so-called Gujarat Model, in its globalised ambition, competed with the Indian Model, which, in spite of incremental improvements, was sustained by the old habits of a controlling state. In the Gujarat Model, getting even a nod from the *Economist*, the no-nonsense nationalist and the big-picture technocrat and the classic conviction politician merged seamlessly, something the Indian Right had never experienced before. More daring was the campaign itself, in its ingenuity and expansiveness. He fought three national state elections, and in each campaign, Gujarat was just the stage and India was the audience—and unlike any other chief minister, he got a receptive one. Before he became India's prime minister, he was India's chief minister. On the stump as an incumbent chief minister, he drew from the political themes of the times, from the anxieties of the post-9/11 world to radical Islamism to the mendacity of Musharraf to endangered national security, to create a powerful text that mobilised and kept the Modi Momentum steady. India was on his mind as Gujarat flourished on his watch.

At the end of such a campaign, Modi was the inevitability of 2014. It was the history-shifting arrival of the outsider long before Brexit and Trump made Outsider a political pronoun. His Nation First was not the posturing of an isolationist spouting the virtues of economic nationalism. In power, the nationalist didn't go to the extreme end of the right, whether it was in the marketplace or in the political arena. He did not live up to the expectation of those who were waiting for a Gujarati version of Reagan; the social reality of an uneven India couldn't afford a state without compassion. He campaigned from the right side of the nation; he governs mostly from the centre, without the flourish associated with the campaigner. The kinetic force of the Gujarat model is not what we see behind Modi's model for India, the nationalist project of restoration being the exception. The gradualist is at work, and gradualism abhors drama. Still, the personal makes all the difference—he is still India's most trusted politician, and the most popular too. The sense of autonomy he exudes comes from his definition of politics as a personal rite, in which, it seems, he allows no adjectives, no distractions. Biography is a shared mirror in his story.

That said, definitions of others try to trap him, make him fit into the size of their dissent—or their adoration. The dissent usually comes from those who think popular choice can be a moral error. Since they can't dismiss the people, they will build an alternative of social wretchedness and institutional degeneration. Dissent also comes from those who import made-to-measure moulds of autocracies and illiberal democracies from such faraway places as Hungary and Russia and Turkey to make him comprehensible. And adoration at times tolerates the hateful crassness from the fringe, which clashes with the sophistication Modi maintains steadfastly as prime minister. As a subject in the passions and possibilities of democracy, Modi needs to be redeemed from convenient definitions. He is smarter than the definitions allow him to be. Smarter because few politicians in our time have shown that power is a permanent pursuit of change. We are learning to live with it—no matter thrillingly or grudgingly. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

IF ONLY THEY had cared to do a wee bit of homework, the Gandhi siblings would have spared themselves great embarrassment. Thanks to the patronage of Navjot Singh Sidhu, they now have egg splattered all over their faces. Unmindful of his abrupt twists and turns in a rather short political career, the Gandhis one fine morning ordered the ejection of the well-regarded Captain Amarinder Singh from the chief ministerial *gaddi*. The Punjab Congress command was promptly handed over to the maverick while a dark horse was nominated to replace the good Captain. Confusing and conflicting signals soon followed. The Gandhis encouraged Sidhu to believe he was the chief minister-in-waiting, with Charanjit Singh Channi keeping the chair warm until the Assembly election. Simultaneously, Channi was asked to assert his authority and tell Sidhu to confine himself to party affairs. This was not acceptable to Sidhu. Why? Because Navjot Singh Sidhu is obsessed with Navjot Singh Sidhu.

Now, whether or not Sidhu is persuaded to withdraw his resignation, the much-vaunted move by the Gandhis to tell the world who is the boss of the party they treat as a family heirloom has ended in a complete fiasco. Instead of dispelling the image of cluelessness and immaturity, the Punjab experiment may have consolidated further Rahul Gandhi's popular image as Pappu. Meanwhile, Sidhu's tantrum may have Archana Puran Singh worried. The Bollywood actor who joined Kapil Sharma's comedy show after Sidhu's departure for fulltime politics, and laughs like a hyena to out-Sidhu Sidhu, has reason to be tense, fearing the return of the original proponent of the *thoko taali* variety of street-level humour.

OF ALL THE sectoral regulators put in place post-economic liberalisation, undoubtedly, the one that has acquitted itself well is the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). The share market and securities regulator has, to a large extent, succeeded in curbing insider trading, a rampant malpractice that had underpinned the early success of one of India's most iconic companies, among several others. Unfortunately, other regulators have been found wanting to a lesser or a greater degree. One that has done the worst concerns the real estate sector. The RERA regulators invariably are slow to address the grievances of tens of millions who have put their lifetime savings in homes or small commercial flats. Failing to standardise certain charges levied by unscrupulous developers, they have allowed the latter to game the regulatory setup.

For example, take this case of a retired bureaucrat who invested his savings in a commercial flat in Gurugram. He seems to be waging a losing battle with the developer who invents newer ways to extort money. Hitherto an unheard of annual levy for rent collection, a brokerage of three or more months for finding a tenant, and ₹500 per square foot towards book transfer charges speaks loud and clear of the failure of the RERA regulator. But the Gurugram regulators show no inclination to step in and prevent the shortchanging of poor investors. Instead of standardising such charges across the sector, each real estate developer most arbitrarily games the system while the regulators make merry on their sinecures. Mercifully, in its dying years, the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Commission had put in place a standard formula for measuring super and carpet areas. Prior to the MRTP Commission intervention, builders would often appropriate up to three-fourths of the booked area towards common services or as super area.

PARTY HOPPERS ARE shame-proof. Navjot Singh Sidhu is a prime example. Social media is teeming with videos wherein he swears undying loyalty to "Narendrabhai Modi and BJP," virtually calling the former his "*Bhagwan*". But Sidhu is not an exception. Though he is the loudest possible advertisement of political opportunism. How about Kanhaiya Kumar—the darling of the self-professed liberal-progressive-secularists ever since the Central Government ill-advisedly bestowed celebrity on him, seeking to penalise him for his rash utterances on a freewheeling JNU platform? Kanhaiya has now dumped the Communist Party of India (CPI) to join Congress. Within hours, videos of his wild fulminations against Congress in general, and the Gandhis in particular, were doing the social media rounds. Tellingly, CPI leader D Raja remarked that the party did not leave Kanhaiya, he left the party—without showing him the courtesy of a goodbye. And while dumping CPI, he walked away with an air-conditioner from the party's Patna office. So much then for the revolutionary idealism flowing in his veins. ■

MONTHLY PREDICTION

October 2021

By **Dr. Sohini Sastri**
National Award Winning Astrologer
www.sohinisastri.com

Aries (Mar 21 - Apr 19): Businessmen are suggested to be calm and stick to the basic routes for success. Students need to be careful about the matters they are dealing with, else, they will end up messing their studies. For the lovebirds, this might be a difficult month for they might face issues with their partner regarding their future plannings. Married couples, however, will be able to deal with their problems and enjoy a month of happiness. For finance, things will be moderate. Major health problems will not worry you, however, try to be careful about minor health ailments.

Taurus (Apr 20 - May 20): Business, Career, new ventures will flourish beyond expectation. If you are married, you will be blessed by your in-laws in terms of monetary, business-oriented and political support. This is the right time to pursue your dreams. There might be minor health issues but you can overcome that. Try to spend more time with your spouse, and this may add to your happiness

Gemini (May 21 - Jun 20): This is a very tough time for the businessman but the old customer may bring fate. Students can go to foreign for studies. Singles are likely to find love this month. Finance-wise, things look good. A family issue might keep you stressed and worried. Think twice before making any financial decisions.

Cancer (Jun 21 - Jul 23): For those in business, avoid making fuzzy decisions. Students in their post-graduation might find themselves fixing their love-related issues. A married couple will sp[end happy life. Try to give time to your family members for avoiding some major issues. You can go for a small vacation. No major health issues.

Leo (Jul 24 - Aug 22): Ventures with friends and relatives will be very fruitful. Financial status will increase. Overseas businesses will improve a lot. Try to avoid your unruly nightlife. Focus on your lifestyle & health. Favourable developments like promotion and increment may get delayed now.

Virgo (Aug 23 - Sep 22): Businessmen may be trying to increase their product sales, try to focus on receivables as well. Students pursuing their graduation might find themselves working very hard. This month looks favourable for salaried employees. Singles are likely to find love this month. In matters pertaining to finance and money, things seem great. This month will fare average pertaining to your health issues. You might also be at a chance of having a viral infection.

Libra (Sep 23 - Oct 22): You will be appreciated by your boss. You can have excessive work pressure in this month so some health problems may occur. Be aware of that. Married couples may have some misunderstandings so keep patience and work accordingly. There is a high possibility for an injury on the upper part of your body mid-month, so you need to be extra conscious.

Scorpio (Oct 23 - Nov 22): It suggests that you should not expect too much from others or yourself. This will make life a lot easier. Look for good attributes in others and this will help good relationships. The month is encouraging for mutual understanding. Keep harmony with family members and this will help you to live a peaceful life. Scorpio compatibility will be affected by your emotional outbursts this month. It is important to control your irritation as your love partners are your well-wishers.

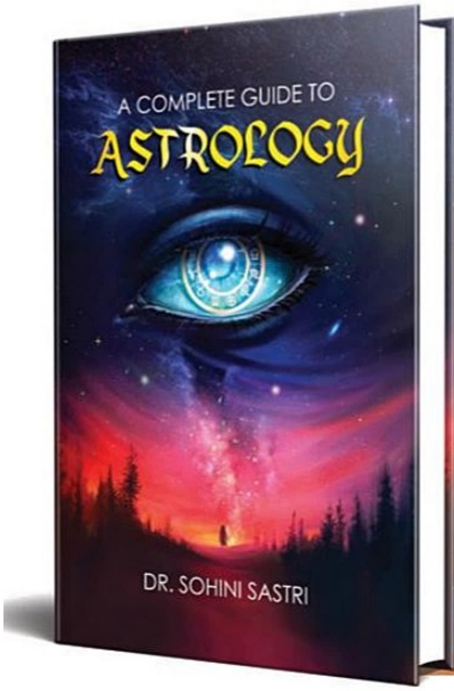
Virat Kohli (Nov 05, 1988)

Sagittarius (Nov 23 - Dec 21): Businessmen may find themselves striking a deal with a company that is based overseas. Students are likely to regain lost focus, however, might also find themselves dealing with personal problems. Your money flow will surely increase. You may need to be very careful as you might be troubled with a throat infection. No major health issues.

Capricorn (Dec 22 - Jan 19): There is a chance of a wedding or a similar occasion in the family. Financial conditions may degrade as you have to invest a lot for this. Don't worry, it is temporary and it will improve your social status. You will do a great job in balancing your career and family, parents and elders will start to believe in your potential to take responsibility.

Aquarius (Jan 20 - Feb 18): Couples need to know their partner accurately. There is various way to earn money, no scope for big expanses. Singles are more into their study and career growth except for the relationships. The movement of two major planets may cause a slight delay in the finalization of this deal.

Pisces (Feb 19 - Mar 20): It's important for business people to pay attention to payments concerning outstanding matters. They may also end up extending credit to new customers, but after conducting proper research. For those in salaried jobs, you will be motivated to do even better. As for the ones pursuing graduation, it's important to be calm and for the ones in post-graduation, you may be busy with not so important matters.



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ASTROLOGY
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ASTROLOGY
16 2021

By Minhaz Merchant

What Frightens Rahul Gandhi

A strong Indian economy is Congress' worst nightmare

NO, IT'S NOT Narendra Modi. What frightens Rahul Gandhi is India winning its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the economy booming, and jobs returning. Just when the Congress-led opposition thought it had the prime minister cornered, he might pull off a Houdini act before the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

A strong Indian economy in the runup to 2024 is Congress' worst nightmare. And it might actually happen. Exports are set to cross a record high of $400 billion in 2021-22. Foreign investment is pouring into Indian startups. Corporate profits are up by over 20 per cent. Inflation is falling.

The Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme is turning out to be a sleeper hit. Foreign and domestic manufacturers are lining up to seize the financial incentives on offer if they meet incremental annual production targets.

Rahul Gandhi's biggest worry is that all the bad news—Covid-19, farmers' protests, the economy and jobs—he was relying on to undermine the Modi Government has peaked too early. That won't help Priyanka Gandhi Vadra who is leading the Congress charge in the UP election

Manufacturing meanwhile is shifting steadily, but surely, from China. President Xi Jinping's relentless campaign to rein in Chinese oligarchs has unnerved foreign investors. Many global firms such as Tesla and Apple are hedging their bets by moving their production lines to Vietnam, Taiwan—and India.

Covid-19 is seemingly coming under control in India. Cases have moderated. Over 85 crore vaccine doses have been administered. Vaccinations are currently averaging more than 80 lakh doses a day. (For comparision, doses administered daily in the US are averaging one-tenth that figure despite a more advanced healthcare ecosystem.)

At the present rate of around 24 crore doses a month, India is on target to administer 100 crore doses by mid-October.

There are still slender pickings of bad news elsewhere, however, if Gandhi pours through the mournful weekly diatribe on job losses by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). Jobless growth could have provided welcome relief to Congress as its attacks on Covid-19 mismanagement and the prospect of an impending economic armageddon peter out.

Unfortunately, the formal economy alone recorded 9.02 lakh fresh payroll jobs in July, putting the country on course to create over 1 crore jobs in the next 12 months. Companies have begun hiring. A good monsoon could see agricultural jobs and farm incomes in the informal economy bounce back as well.

Gandhi worries about the impact this would have on the 2022 Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly election. Till a few months ago, it was easy to revile UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Images of bodies floating in the Ganga river were splashed across international media.

But UP has turned the corner. It is recording new Covid cases in low double digits. The state has administered over 9 crore vaccine doses so far, more than any other state (Maharashtra is second with nearly 7 crore doses). Law and order in UP, even the opposition concedes, is better than it was under the Samajwadi Party (SP) in 2012-17.

All this adds up to a problem for Gandhi. He has relied for 11 months on the farmers' protests to mould a new narrative in western UP. Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) President Rakesh Tikait, who is leading the protests, fought two elections in Uttar Pradesh—in 2007 with Congress support and in 2014 on a Rashtriya Lok Dal ticket. He lost both.

Tikait has used reverse-polarisation to bridge the gap between Muslims and Jats in western UP. His chants of "Allahu Akbar"" and "Har Har Mahadev" are meant to heal the wounds of the communal riots in Muzaffarnagar in 2013.

It's a risky strategy. Counter-polarisation by invoking such hybrid slogans can alienate the rest of UP.

Gandhi's biggest worry is that all the bad news—Covid-19, farmers' protests, the economy and jobs—he was relying on to undermine the Government has peaked too early.

That won't help Priyanka Gandhi Vadra who is leading the Congress charge in the UP Assembly election. Gandhi Vadra can't afford to fail the UP test. But in a multi-cornered contest among BJP, SP-Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen and regional parties, failure is the most likely outcome.

That could dull the sheen on Gandhi Vadra's vote-catching charisma that has not been fully tested in an election so far. Rahul Gandhi knows the danger, and price, of failure.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra turns 50 a month before the UP election. The Gandhis know her electoral test cannot be put off any longer. For Rahul Gandhi, his sister's failure in UP will jeopardise not only Congress' prospects in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls but loosen, perhaps terminally, the family's hold on Congress. That is a real fear. ■

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By **SWAPAN DASGUPTA**

FROM THE REALISTIC TO THE IMPOSSIBLE

The principles that drive the Modi momentum

MODI IN POWER @20

POLITICS—AND, INDEED, governance—we have long been accustomed to being told, is "the art of the possible". The subtext of this sage advice for moderation in public life is to avoid haste and usher change in society "bit by bit, so that nobody will notice it"—as the parody version of the British socialist song 'Red Flag' put it. In a sense, this also corresponds to the romantic notion of an 'unchanging India' where there is a seamless transition from one generation to another. Revolutionary impetuosity, we have long realised, has always come a cropper in India. In the evocative imagery of civil servant and historian Vincent Smith, ripples on the surface have left the depths unmoved.

At the same time, there is an alternative vision that corresponds to the reformist impulses of those Indians who spent much of the late-19th century and early-20th century debating and agonising over the reasons why India had lost its national sovereignty for a thousand years or so. It centred primarily on the shortcomings in the national character and what could be done to overcome passivity and inculcate the values of robust nationhood in a country overwhelmed by both servitude and grinding poverty. Swami Vivekananda's "Awake" message, Lokmanya Tilak's defiant assertion of Swaraj as a birthright and Mahatma Gandhi's vision of activism as a quest for the truth were instrumental in securing the restoration of national sovereignty to India. But moving to the next stage and rediscovering what Jawaharlal Nehru, in his midnight-hour speech on August 14th-15th, 1947, described as the "soul of a nation long suppressed" has proved more problematic. Since 1947, India has grappled for direction and an answer to the question: "What sort of India do we want?" It was a query that neither lent itself to easy solutions, nor addressed the more complex issue of national character.

The answers to complex and seemingly intractable problems don't lie in catchy slogans—though these can often help. In May 1968, when much of Western Europe and parts of the US were engulfed in student protests—against war, against boredom and against purposeless consumerism—a strange poster made an appearance at the Sorbonne in Paris: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." I think it summed up the dilemma confronting Narendra Modi when he first assumed public office two decades ago.

Whether a view of Modi as an instrument of far-reaching change crossed the minds of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and, more important, Lal Krishna Advani, that fateful morning in September 2001 when they selected him as the chief minister of Gujarat, is not known. It seems very unlikely. Confronted by a rising tide of disaffection over the management of the post-earthquake reconstruction and a string of by-election reverses, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) looked for an alternative to Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel. In Modi, they imagined a leader of boundless energy with deft organisational skills and with a capacity to inspire the party faithful. Earlier, Modi's no-nonsense approach as the Sangathan Mantri had riled the top leadership of the Gujarat BJP and they had successfully manoeuvred his ouster from the state. Now, the national leadership felt they needed him to salvage a difficult situation. "I have been asked to win a T-20 match," he remarked to me as he got on the flight to Ahmedabad.

For BJP, the elevation of Modi from an apparatchik to the chief political executive of an important state that had become a BJP

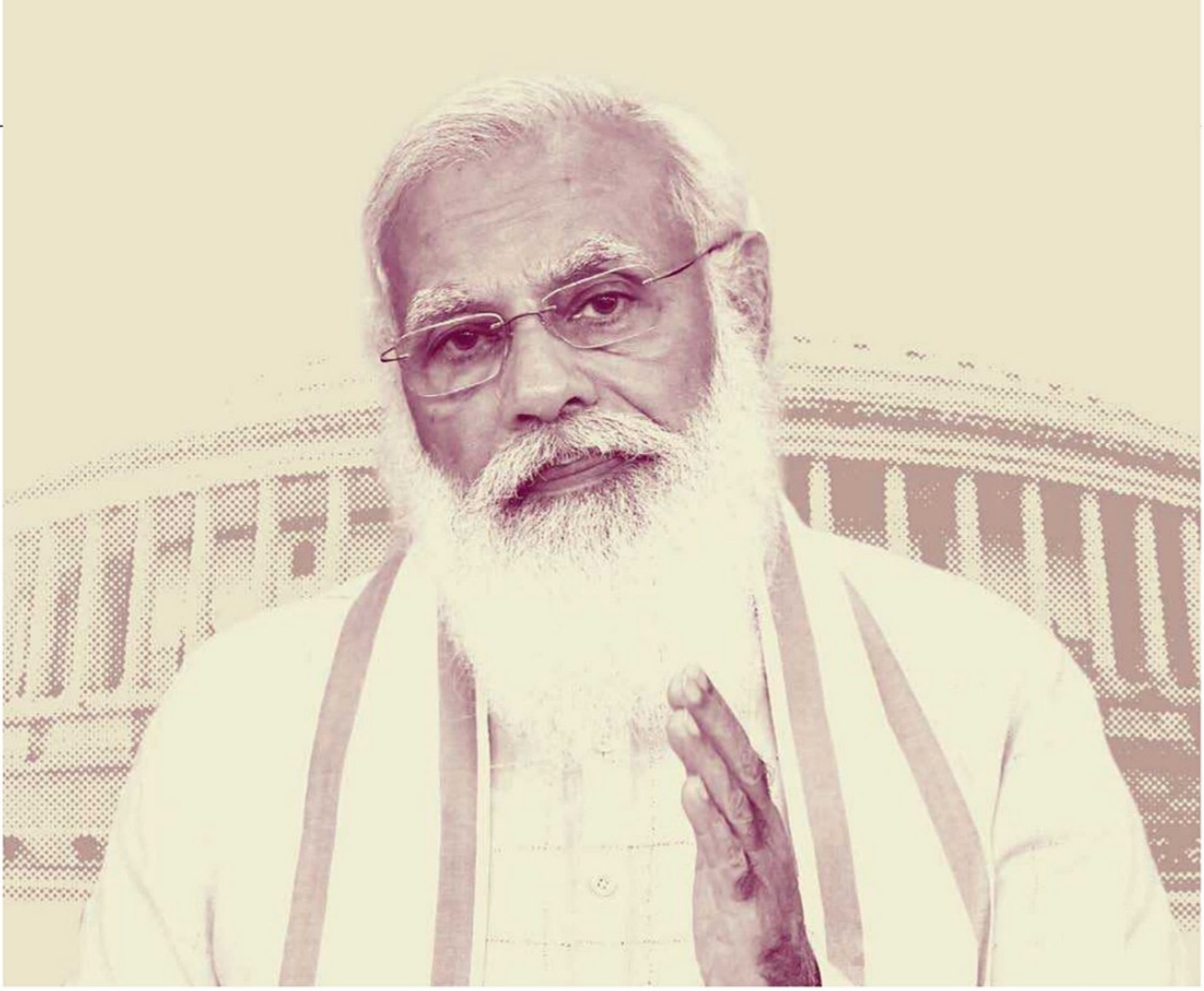

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Modi was never impressed with doctrinaire approaches. Just as India's trading communities have combined their grasp of available opportunities with cultural sensitivities, Modi has combined vision with a commitment to reformism, rather than a revolutionary break. Rather than rush ahead with a copy of Milton Friedman or Hayek in hand, Modi has steadfastly focused on what is expedient

stronghold since 1991 was a gamble. They understood that Modi had boundless energy and enthusiasm but their perspectives were limited to political management. They were also aware that Modi—unlike many Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *pracharak*s who rigidly adhered to a pre-determined framework—was fiercely independent, even somewhat rebellious. "His problem," a very senior RSS functionary once told me, "is that he is temperamentally argumentative. Every instruction is invariably responded with a Why." Yet, it was this ability to think out of the box that saved Gujarat for BJP and enabled Modi to emerge from the furore over the post-Godhra riots of 2002 as a hero.

The resounding political success of BJP and Modi in the 2002 Assembly election, however, created an associated problem. Due to the highly surcharged atmosphere that prevailed in the state after the riots and the relentless assault on the chief minister by a phalanx of secularists, the image of Modi became that of a pugnacious Hindu warrior—a modern-day Shivaji. The perception wasn't unfounded but it was partial and seriously underplayed his abilities as an architect of effective governance.

The imbalance owed entirely to his shrill critics—particularly those in the media—who were unable to fathom that Modi's recurring successes in Gujarat and his growing all-India appeal between 2002 and 2014 owed to his Hindu assertiveness being combined with his spectacularly impressive record as an administrator and reformer in Gujarat.

Gujarat was always a business-friendly state and Modi's thrust in Gujarat always factored in the temperament of the people. Many of these approaches would subsequently be modified when he assumed charge as prime minister of India in 2014. At the same time, the element of continuity was marked.

Let me explore some of the principles that have driven Modi over these past two decades.

First, there is the vision thing. In the four years of political exile from Gujarat before 2001, Modi travelled incessantly, both within India and overseas. The takeaway from his overseas visits—to the US, to countries in Europe and to Australia—was a determination to ensure that India broke out of its Third World status and joined the ranks of the advanced democracies. Unlike many in the RSS-BJP *parivar* who were wedded to an idea of Indian exceptionalism—which sometimes translated into a celebration of the 'unchanging India' and a Gandhian suspicion of modern technology—Modi embraced enhanced living standards and technology quite enthusiastically. Perhaps inspired by the example of the Gujarati diaspora that combined adaptability in the outside world with rootedness at home, Modi rejected the fear that engagement with the world would see an automatic dilution of India's indigenous culture. This perspective may even have been enhanced during subsequent visits to Japan and interaction with former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who combined his fierce nationalism with his country's traditional openness to the wider world. Modi, a committed disciple of Swami Vivekananda, evolved his own Global Hindutva that was neither exclusionary nor hegemonic.

Second, Modi was never impressed with doctrinaire approaches. Just as India's trading communities, not least peripatetic Gujaratis, have combined their grasp of available opportunities with cultural sensitivities—an awareness of the limits of existing possibilities—Modi has combined vision with a commitment to reformism, rather than a revolutionary break. Rather than rush ahead with a copy of Milton Friedman or Hayek in hand, Modi has steadfastly focused on what is expedient.

One of the lessons the entire BJP drew from the unexpected defeat of the Vajpayee Government in 2004 was that drum-beating privatisation went against popular inclinations. Yes, there were elements of India's over-extended public sector that should, ideally, be monetised and invested in more worthwhile ventures. However, the premium was put on improved efficiency. Between 2002 and 2014, the Gujarat government outdid most other Indian states in attracting new investments and creating a manufacturing base. Yet, what is remarkable—and something that Modi never failed to point out—is that the improvements were effected using the very same civil servants that were inherited from Congress' socialist dispensation. What Modi provided them additionally was motivation, training and respect.

This approach was replicated in his dealings with the all-India bureaucracy. Modi did attach special importance to efficiency—especially in the dealings with ministries where the minister, while politically of consequence, lacked domain knowledge—but an additional criterion was integrity.

The third feature of Modi's approach that shows a continuity from his Gujarat days is the reliance on technology. Personally adept in the use of technology for daily needs, Modi has been quick

AFP

Narendra Modi takes the oath of office as Gujarat's chief minister for the second time on December 22, 2002

to seize the importance of technology to increase the efficiency of government and curb the discretionary powers of babus, a crucial step against corruption. The template was provided by the Gujarat government's decision to make the entire transfer and posting of teachers—previously a major racket—online, thereby ensuring transparency and freeing it from corruption.

In 2014, the future of the Aadhaar scheme—initiated by the outgoing United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government—was in some doubt. It is to Modi's credit that he grasped the larger potential of the ambitious programme, overruled all political objections and enlarged its usage to cover different government initiatives. This was to come in handy during the Covid-19 vaccination programme.

Similarly, disregarding doctrinaire demand for the complete denationalisation of banks, the Modi Government adopted two approaches. First, there was a sustained drive, including new laws, which served as a deterrent against the misuse of bank credit by persons with political connections. Second, the reach of the banking system was dramatically extended with the introduction of zero-balance Jan Dhan accounts. The logic of this became apparent first during demonetisation and subsequently with the Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) to beneficiaries of government welfare schemes both at the Centre and in the states. The extent to which DBT, based on technology, has curbed the leakage of welfare funds is incalculable. It has created the architecture of modern welfarism in India.

> **Whether a view of Modi as an instrument of far-reaching change crossed the minds of Vajpayee and Advani when they selected him as chief minister is not known. In Modi, they imagined a leader of boundless energy with deft organisational skills and with a capacity to inspire the party faithful**

Fourth, Modi realised quite early on during his tenure as chief minister that big government programmes, especially those aimed at transforming society, could only work with popular participation, perhaps using the resources of political parties. The Swachh Bharat Mission targeting households and communities that didn't have pucca toilets has been a resounding success. While outside defecation, especially by women, hasn't been totally resolved, it can be said with certainty that there is widespread awareness of the scheme—as well as the scheme to convert makeshift houses into those with brick walls and roofs—and pressure on the local administration from below to deliver. While there have been reports of panchayat functionaries demanding kickbacks for sanctioning the grant—West Bengal, for example, has reported an organised racket involving the participation of those in power at the state level—it would be fair to say that a large part of the Indian countryside has been transformed. If the ongoing Jal Jeevan Mission lives up to its potential, the Modi era will see Indian villages blessed with electricity (a commitment already fulfilled), drinking water in households, pucca toilets and brick houses. The definition of 'unchanging India' could well be dramatically altered.

Finally, Modi has always realised the paramount importance of linking governance with the political base. The inability to prevent the detachment of party from government was one of the factors behind the disappointing performance of BJP in 2004. What Modi has done is to complement good governance with concrete action on issues that are dear to BJP and its ideological family. It would not be inaccurate to say that hardly any BJP worker or supporter expected a rapid solution to the longstanding Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. For that matter, it had become conventional wisdom that the 'temporary' Article 370 had more or less acquired permanent status and that the 'special status' of Jammu and Kashmir would always endure. Last, since 1940, there had been no reforms in Muslim personal laws and the impression that organisations such as the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board exercised a permanent veto on progressive legislation had been implanted on the political consciousness of India.

BJP had led vigorous campaigns for the construction of the Ram temple, the abrogation of Article 370 and demanded a Uniform Civil Code. The three formed an important part of what the party perceived as its core ideological agenda and its distinctiveness. Yet, while all three routinely featured on BJP's election manifestos, there was an unspoken admission that no progress was possible on these issues.

Earlier, the compulsions of running a coalition government were cited as the reason for tardy or no progress. From 2014, this was no longer true. It was now a question of priorities and political will. The Ayodhya dispute of course depended on the Supreme Court where the stand of the Government constituted an important input. However, in taking the plunge on Article 370 and beginning the process of updating Muslim personal laws, the Modi Government showed steely determination and a commitment to the faithful. This may explain why, throughout his 20 years in public office, Modi has had the cushioning of the enthusiastic political backing of his party.

Modi has been realistic but he has also managed what seemed impossible. He has redefined Indian politics.■

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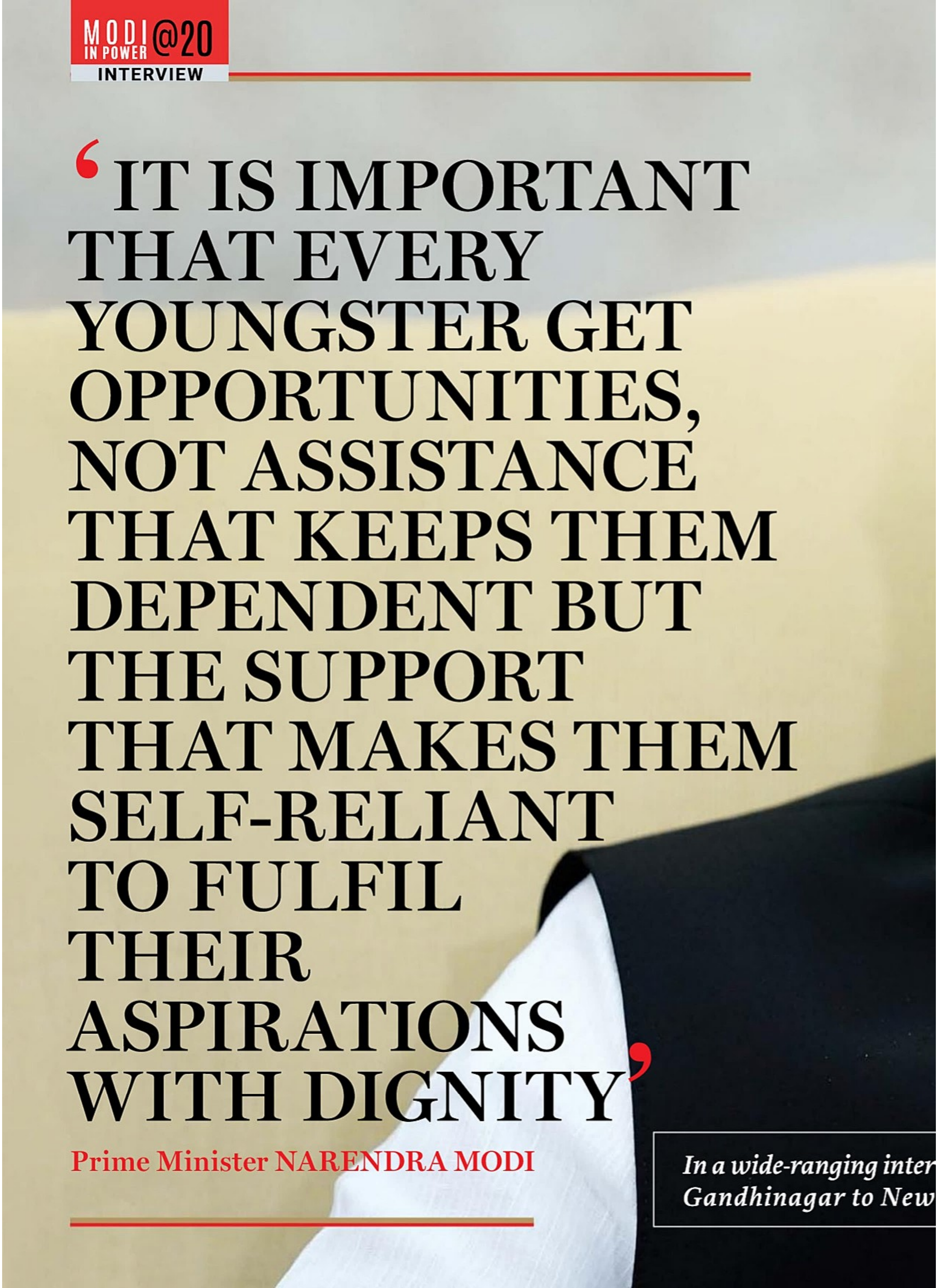
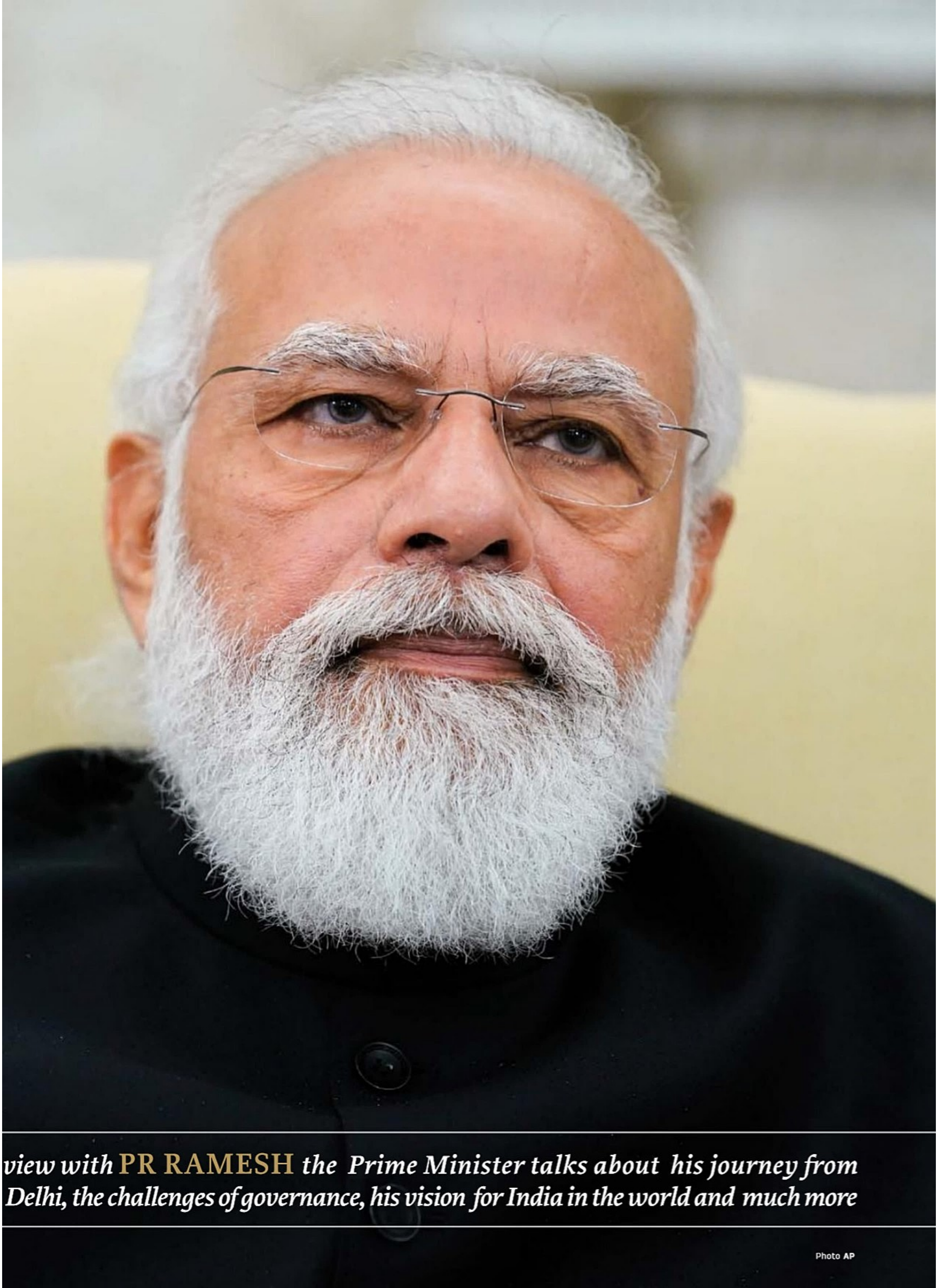


‘IT IS IMPORTANT THAT EVERY YOUNGSTER GET OPPORTUNITIES, NOT ASSISTANCE THAT KEEPS THEM DEPENDENT BUT THE SUPPORT THAT MAKES THEM SELF-RELIANT TO FULFIL THEIR ASPIRATIONS WITH DIGNITY’

Prime Minister NARENDRA MODI

In a wide-ranging inter
Gandhinagar to New



view with **PR RAMESH** *the Prime Minister talks about his journey from Delhi, the challenges of governance, his vision for India in the world and much more*

Photo AP

Congratulations on completing two decades in government. Two decades is a long time. It has indeed been a long, also quite an eventful, time for someone who was reluctant to enter the electoral arena until circumstances thrust him into the office of Gujarat's chief minister in the aftermath of a catastrophe. How has been the experience of a tumultuous journey? And what have been your most satisfying moments?

You used the word reluctant.

In a way, you are right...let alone reluctance to join electoral politics, I had nothing to do with the political domain itself. My surroundings, my inner world, my philosophy—these were very different. Right from my younger days, my bent was spiritual.

The tenet of '*Jan Seva Hi Prabhu Seva*' (Serving people is akin to serving the divine), which was propounded by Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda always inspired me. It became a driving force in whatever I did.

As for politics, I did not even have a remote connection to it. It was much later that due to circumstances, and at the insistence of some friends, that I joined politics. Even there, I was in a position where I was primarily doing organisational work.

Twenty years ago, the circumstances became such that I had to enter a completely unchartered territory of heading an administration. And this happened in 2001, when Gujarat was adversely affected by one of the most devastating earthquakes our nation has seen.

Having closely seen the deep trouble people were in, I had no time or opportunity to even ponder what the new turn in my life meant. I immediately got into relief, rehabilitation and rebuilding Gujarat.

> "Twenty years ago, the circumstances became such that I had to enter a completely unchartered territory of heading an administration"

> "In the eyes of the world, being prime minister and chief minister may be a very big thing but in my own eyes, these are ways to do something for the people"

If you were to ask me...achieving or becoming something has never been a part of my inner being.

My innermost instinct has always been to do something for others. Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, there is a desire to do something or the other for people. Working for others is what has always instilled a feeling of '*Svantah Sukhaya*' or self-fulfilment in me.

In the eyes of the world, being prime minister and chief minister may be a very big thing but in my own eyes, these are ways to do something for the people. Mentally, I keep myself detached from this world of power, glitz and glamour. And due to that, I am able to think like a common citizen and walk on my path of duty just like I would if I were given any other responsibility.

You asked about satisfying moments. Well, there could be quite a few but let me give you a recent example.

In the last few months, I got to meet and interact with our Olympic and Paralympic heroes. Tokyo 2020 has been India's finest so far. Yet, naturally there were several athletes who did not win medals. When I met them, they were lamenting their inability to win medals. But each of them only had praise for the efforts of our nation in supporting them in their training, facilities, and other kinds of assistance. At the same time, they were determined and energised to give their best to win more medals.

In my mind, I thought...see how far we have come. Earlier, our sportspersons used to worry about lack of facilities, support, etcetera. These were things they could not do anything about.

But now they feel that part is sorted and their whole focus is on things they can control and their thirst for a medal has taken centrestage. They had a sense of satisfaction that the county has supported them and the determination to do something extraordinary for the nation and bring home more medals in the times to come. This change is satisfying.

You have travelled a long distance. From someone who was forced to hawk tea and whose mother had to work in others' homes to provide food for the family to the top political office of the world's largest democracy, and arguably the most popular prime minister, it is really stuff legends are made of. Do you get awed by the trajectory you have traversed?

I don't get awed by the trajectory of my own life. I get awed by the kind of country we are and our people, who can pick a poor child and make him reach where I have. I feel privileged that the people of this country have given me such huge responsibilities and continue to repose their trust in me. This is the strength of our democracy.

As for me selling tea as a child and later becoming the prime minister of our nation, I see this very differently from how you see it.

I feel that the 130 crore people of India have the same capabilities that I have. What I have achieved, can be achieved by anyone.

If I can, anyone can!

A nation of 130 crore capable people...the contribution that our country can make to humankind is tremendous!

And so, where I started, where I reached, what I did, what my individual experiences are, these things do not matter much. What matters is that this shows that any Indian can achieve anything.

That is why empowering people by making upward mobility achievable has become one of the fundamental motivations for me. It is important that every youngster get opportunities. And when I speak of opportunities, I do not merely refer to assistance that keeps them dependent but the support that makes them

“Right from my younger days, my bent was spiritual. The tenet of ‘*Jan Seva Hi Prabhu Seva*’ always inspired me”

“All governments were formed under a person from Congress Gotra. Thus, there was no difference between their political and economic thought”

self-reliant to fulfil their aspirations, with dignity.

You have defied the caricatures of your being a gung-ho free-market liberaliser or a champion of what your critics call RSS-endorsed upper-caste orthodoxy. Your opponents concede in private that they have not been able to figure you out completely. Were the populist portrayals incorrect to begin with, or is it that they have turned out to be incorrect because you keep changing course to meet the temper of the times or the diktats of practical politics?
The problem here is not Modi...but when any person tries to see anything with a preconceived mindset, then either he is able to see only half of the view or is inspired to see wrong things. And if he is not able to see anything as per his preconceived notion, then he creates a perception to feed his preconceived mindset.

We all know it is the nature of Man to not accept his mistakes easily. It takes courage to accept truth over your wrong notions. And it is because of this that one forms notions about a person even without meeting, knowing or understanding him. And even if they meet you in person and observe something different (as compared to their notion), they will still not accept it just to feed their ego. This is a natural tendency.

If someone had only analysed my work, he would not be under any confusion about me. After I became chief minister, the first thing which I did, about 20 years ago, when I didn’t have any prior experience of administration...I first of all went to the people affected by the Kutch earthquake. I publicly stated that this is first Diwali after the earthquake, so we will not celebrate it and I was there with the families of the earthquake victims on the day of Diwali and shared their suffering.

And the first public function which I did after becoming chief minister was the Garib Kalyan Mela. If someone would have understood all this, then the work done by me today, like building toilets in poor people’s homes or providing free ration to the poor, would have been easier for them to understand.

And it does not mean that Modi has no faults or there is no point on which Modi can be criticised.

Secondly, I feel, and this is my conviction, that for my own healthy development, I attach a big importance to criticism. I, with an honest mind, respect critics a lot. But, unfortunately, the number of critics is very few. Mostly, people only level allegations, the people who play games about perception are more in number. And the reason for this is that, for criticism, one has to do a lot of hard work, research and, in today’s fast-paced world, maybe people don’t have time. So sometimes, I miss critics.

From your question it seems that outdated theories of the last century like private sector versus public sector, government versus people, rich versus poor, urban versus rural are still on your mind and you seem to fit everything into this.

Global experience says that government should be there for those for whom nobody is there. Government’s whole focus should be on helping them. Take the example of our aspirational districts programme to ensure that no region should be left behind in India. We created an atmosphere of healthy competition, mobilised resources, enthused confidence among citizens. Even those districts that were lagging behind in several parameters have come up and improved drastically. A breakthrough has been achieved and you will see great results in the future.

Like everyone thought that sport was restricted to a certain class of society, but we have extremely talented people in poor and backward regions. If we reach them, sport can go a long way in the country and results have showed that. Kids of Tier 2, Tier 3 cities and even of villages can be seen these days competing in the playground.

So, I would like to say that if our work was evaluated then the question you asked shouldn’t have arisen. This question is on the basis of perception and not on the basis of the real situation.

You are seen as a risk-taker. While you chose not to press ahead with your plan for amending the land acquisition laws, you showed your readiness to venture outside the box by demonetising high-denomination notes, crossing the Rubicon on labour reforms and by refusing to roll back the farm laws. Are you not worried about the consequences of these risky, although essential, forays into the taboo zones where your predecessors feared to go?
The politics of our country is such that till now, we have seen only one model in which governments are run to build the next government (*sarkar banane ke liye sarkar chalayi jaati hai*).

My fundamental thinking is different. I believe we have to run the Government to build the nation (*desh banane ke liye sarkar chalani hai*).

The tradition has been to run the government to make your party win but my purpose is to run the Government in a way to make our country win.

And due to this basic concern, I take decisions based on Gandhiji’s talisman that sees how my decisions will benefit or harm the poorest or weakest person.

While taking decisions, I stop even if the slightest of vested interests is visible to me. The decision should be pure and authentic and if the decision passes through all these tests, then I firmly move forward to implement such a decision.

The things that people of India are entitled to, those benefits that they should have received decades ago, have still not reached them. India shouldn't be put in a situation where it has to wait any longer for the things that this country and its citizens are entitled to, we should give it to them. And for this, big decisions should be taken and if need be, tough decisions should also be taken.

In such a large country as India, is it possible to make a decision which is acceptable to 100 per cent people? Although if a decision is not acceptable to even a small number of people, they are not wrong. They may have their own genuine concerns but if the decision is in larger interest, then it is the responsibility of government to implement such a decision.

If a political party makes a promise and is unable to deliver on that promise, then that is one aspect which the political class must improve upon. But there is another aspect which is completely different from this and is a particularly undesirable and, I would say, detestable trait in certain sections of the political parties. This trait I am talking of is the trait of intellectual dishonesty and *rajneetik dhokhadhadi.*

There are political parties which will grandiosely make promises before elections, even put them in their manifestos. Yet, when the time comes to deliver on the same promises, these same parties and people do a complete U-turn and worse, spread the most malicious kind of misinformation on the promises they themselves had made.

If you look at those who are opposing the pro-farmer reforms today, you will see the real meaning of intellectual dishonesty and *rajneetik dhokhadhadi.*

These were the same people who wrote letters to chief ministers asking them to do the exact same thing that our Government has done. These were the same people who wrote in their manifesto that they would enact the same reforms that we have brought. Yet, just because some other political party, blessed by the will of the people, is enacting the same reforms, they have made a complete U-turn and in a brazen display of intellectual dishonesty, completely disregard what will benefit the farmers and only seek what they think will benefit them politically.

We are committed to empowering the small farmers in every way. The farm laws about which you are talking, the Government has been saying right from the first day that on whichever point there is a disagreement, the Government is ready to sit together and discuss those issues. Many meetings have also been held in this regard but no one till now has come up with a specific point of disagreement that we want this to be changed.

You can see the same *rajneetik dhokhadhadi* when it comes to Aadhaar, GST, farm laws and even crucial matters such as arming our security forces. Promise something and make arguments for it but oppose the same thing later without any moral fibre.

Don't you think political parties were making a mockery of themselves when their members spoke about the need for a new Parliament, previous speakers said that a new parliament was needed? But if someone tries to do it, they oppose it by making some excuses, how correct is this?

Those who create these types of controversies think that the issue is not whether these decisions would benefit people, but the issue for them is that if these types of decisions are taken, then no one will be able to stop Modi's success. I want to urge everyone that the issue is not whether Modi succeeds or fails, it should be about whether our country succeeds.

When analysts look at these matters, they also seem to only see it as a political matter and not as a matter of moral and political consistency. But these things are far beyond politics and have real-world consequences for the people and our country.

Many experts have come around to concede that the measures taken by you for accelerating growth, reforming the economy and governance, and strengthening infrastructure are steps in the right direction. But they also say the benefits will take time to manifest and you will not be able to reap the rewards in 2024.

This question is also the result of old thoughts of political pundits. If this would have been true, then I would not have been given the opportunity by people to work as a head of government for 20 years.

Those who think along these lines neither know the people of their country, nor their thinking. The people of the country are smart enough to understand all good work done with good selfless intentions and support it. And that is why I have been given the opportunity by the people of the country to work as head of the government for 20 continuous years.

The person who plants a seed should not bother who will get its fruits. The point is not whether I get to reap the benefits of my economic policies or not, the point is that the nation will.

I am grateful to the experts for conceding that measures taken by us for accelerating growth, reforming the economy and governance, and strengthening infrastructure are steps in the right direction.

The benefits may take time to manifest but the people of India are smart and are watching our policies and evaluating them positively. People are seeing the renewed interest among

> "There is a problem in the way sections of our political class view the Indian people. They only see Raj Shakti. They do not see the innate Jan Shakti"

> "If you look at those opposing the pro-farmer reforms today, you will see the real meaning of intellectual dishonesty and *rajneetik dhokhadhadi*"

global agencies and companies about economic momentum and growth in India.

People are noting the record FDI inflows, people are noting rising exports, people are noting good GST numbers, people are noting dozens of startups becoming unicorns, people are noting the high frequency indicators showing an uptick.

“I am grateful to the experts for conceding that measures taken by us for accelerating growth, reforming the economy and governance are steps in the right direction”

“The poor need one type of opportunity and wealth creators need another type of opportunity. Why are pro-poor and pro-business mutually exclusive categories?”

The ideological play of your Government, articulated by you on several occasions, is pro-poor and pro-business. In the pro-business category, the Government has rolled out many measures like scrapping redundant laws, lowering taxes, ease of doing business and PLI, to name a few. The new economy players, particularly digital, are already running with them. Some say the old India Inc is a little slow. But there is unanimity that you are breaking into their mindset with things like the latest defence agreement with the private sector to manufacture aircraft. The pro-poor agenda is even bigger. The approach to governance has changed. You have knocked down corruption through disintermediation. You have taken forward the idea of JAM. It has given an economic GPS to the Government to locate the poor. The amount of savings from DBT is phenomenal. It has directly empowered people. Your thoughts on how things have changed.

The syllabus and environment for primary students, secondary students and the students doing PhD are different but it doesn’t mean that they are in conflict with each other.

Our country is not a developed country yet, we are still grappling with poverty. Every person in society should get opportunities according to his needs and ability. Then only, development is possible.

The poor need one type of opportunity and wealth creators need another type of opportunity. When the Government believes in ‘*Sarvajana Hitaya*, *Sarvajan Sukhaya*’, then its approach can never be unidirectional; rather it becomes multidirectional. The things in which you see contradiction, I see an inter-linkage.

Why are pro-poor and pro-business mutually exclusive categories? Why should we divide policies into one or the other of these buckets? According to me, policymaking should be pro-people. By creating these artificial categories, you are missing out on interdependence in society. Business and people are not working with opposing objectives.

For instance, don’t the poor benefit when the PLI scheme allows companies to expand manufacturing capacity and creates new job opportunities in the manufacturing sector? The objective is to create more jobs through the PLI scheme. When we save thousands of crores of rupees by preventing leakages in public service delivery through JAM, does that not benefit the middle class, taxpayer and businesses? In fact, when the poor and farmers receive direct transfer, they consume more, which in turn helps the middle class and the overall economy.

In many ways, you have changed the governance paradigm of every issue. Look at One Nation, One Card. You have made it portable. While programmes like MGNREGA stay, you have brought in accountability. You have also layered this entitlement programme with empowerment. Same is the case with Ujjwala, power, delivery of foodgrains. In all these schemes, governance is layered with actual proof of concept. Past governments faced a trust deficit on account of poor delivery. How far has the Government moved on trust in the past seven years?

You very well know that I do not come from a royal family. I have lived my life in poverty. I spent 30-35 years as a wandering social worker. I was away from corridors of power and have lived among the people and because of that I know very well what the problems, aspirations and capacities are of the common man. That is why my decisions (when the country has given me the opportunity to work) are an effort to work towards alleviating the hardships of the common man.

Toilets were never seen by anyone as a way to serve the people. But I felt that Toilets are a way to serve the people.

And that is why when I take decisions, the common man feels that this prime minister understands us, thinks like us and is one among us. This sense of belonging among them leads every family to feel that Modi is just like a member of our family. This trust is not developed because of perception created by PR. This trust has been earned through sweat and toil.

I have attempted to live a life where I walk on a knife’s edge, experiencing and living every issue concerning the people. I had promised three things to people when I came to power:

I will not do anything for myself.

I will not do anything with wrong intention.

I will create a new paradigm of hard work.

People see this personal commitment of mine even today. This is how people develop trust.

The immense mutual trust between the Government and citizens has been the foundation for whatever we have been able to achieve in the last seven years.

There is a deep problem in the way many sections of our political class view the Indian people. They only see Raj Shakti and view the Indian people only through that lens. But they do not see the innate Jan Shakti in Indians, they do not see the skills and strengths, the ability and capability of the people.

Take the example of digital payments. I remember a speech by a former finance minister in Parliament in February 2017. In typical condescending tone, that comes to those who only know Raj Shakti, he asked: "[B]uy potatoes and tomatoes digitally in a village fair. What will the poor lady do? Does she know digital payments? Is internet there?"

The answer to him was given by the Jan Shakti when India became the number one digital payments country in the world just three years later, in 2020, with over 25 billion transactions. In just August 2021 alone, over ₹6.39 lakh crore was transacted using UPI, which is a completely homegrown solution by our youth.

This Digital Revolution is powered by the same people who were underestimated: the push-cart vendors, the small shopkeepers, the *samosa* and *chaiwalla*s in roadside corners, the women who buy daily groceries and have found a secure way of payments. They have all not just empowered themselves but by their Jan Shakti empowered India globally by going digital.

"Whether in permitting self-attestation or in reducing thousands of compliances for businesses, we have built a faith-based system"

"Our experience shows that it is the poor who get the maximum benefit of technology. They do not have to pay a bribe or stay behind in the queue to avail services"

This same phenomenon of underestimating our people happened in many other cases.

When we built toilets, they said people won't use it and go back to defecating in the open. When we gave gas connections, they said people will use it the first time and not take refills. When we gave collateral-free loans to small entrepreneurs, they said the money would never come back. The irony was these people gave loans to their cronies and created the NPA problem but were against giving loans to small entrepreneurs.

Such an attitude towards the poor and common citizens of our country is sad and unfortunate.

We see the Jan Shakti in our people as a way to take the nation forward and bow to its immense potential.

One of the reasons we have affected a paradigm shift in governance is because of the mindset change we have brought about. Whether it be in the scope of the schemes, the scale of the delivery, or in the nature of the schemes themselves. However, the biggest mindset change is that we trust our people. Whether it be in permitting self-attestation or reducing thousands of compliances for businesses, we have built a faith-based system.

Crores of households across the country voluntarily gave up their LPG subsidy in the last few years. This happened because they knew that the subsidies forgone would ensure that crores of poor households across the country could access clean LPG fuel. The public would have never trusted us enough and given up thousands of rupees if they didn't appreciate our performance. Similarly, tax evasion has declined since 2014. Apart from various reforms and improved oversight by the Government, there is a lower intent to evade taxes. As people started witnessing that their tax contributions were being effectively utilised, intention to evade taxes reduced considerably.

If you look back at India's last 74 years, there have been four stages: first was Nehrunomics. Then Indira Gandhi. The Indira Gandhis of the 1970s and 1980s were different. First she talked about self-reliance and poverty programmes. Then she started diluting her stand in the 1980s, dialling down and beginning economic liberalisation. It was a period of reforms by stealth. In the third phase, PV Narasimha Rao capitalised on this strategy in a big way. Now, we have Modinomics. In Modinomics, boldness of reforms is unprecedented. That flows from your full majority in Parliament. You are someone who is using social capital for social good.

All governments formed in our country were fundamentally formed under the leadership of a person from Congress *Gotra*. And that is why, for each of them, there was no difference between their political thought process and economic thought process. Atalji was given an opportunity by people but he didn't have a full majority, it was a coalition Government. I am fortunate that this is the first non-Congress Government that was given a full majority by the people. This means that the people of this country voted for complete change (*Poorna Parivartan*).

I had in front of me people's experience of the past 70 years and because of that it was easy to judge what was right and what was wrong. The successes and failures of the past seven decades were in front of me. And because of this, I adopted policies and strategies such that the common man benefited and the country also moved forward.

After years of compulsive reforms, we have brought in reforms through conviction.

We did reforms in the Covid period, something that was unique if you look at countries across the world. Whether in established sectors like insurance, agriculture and labour, or in futuristic sectors like telecom and space.

There is not a single sector where we have not brought fundamental reforms. We also created a conducive environment for state governments to introduce various reforms.

Our reforms are not only aimed at achieving our economic objective of Atmanirbhar Bharat but also focused on Ease of

Living, unlike earlier governments which viewed economic reforms through a narrow prism of facilitating business ventures.

For instance, our Government gave additional borrowing facility to states if they implemented 'One Nation, One Ration Card' which will allows crores of migrants to receive PDS entitlements. Does this not help improve the lives of crores of the poor?

But how beneficial are economic reforms if there are no matching and simultaneous governance reforms? We have worked on both in tandem and in parallel. Over 1,600 old laws have been scrapped. Multiple reforms across the board have made compliance easier for business and for people. Many more such measures are in the pipeline.

In our entire reforms journey, we have taken people along. In our country, it is perhaps the legacy of the British that people and government are considered separate entities and governments alone are expected to work towards betterment of the country. Our model is different; we consider people as partners in the journey for developing India and hence are able to deliver better results.

Vaccination, too, is a classic governance play. You used digital technology to reach everyone. Vaccines reached people and not the other way round. This had never happened in India. And how did it reach the people? It was up to them—where they wanted to go and when. It was the same country where you could not buy ration beyond the designated shop.

Your question itself contains many answers. I would like to appreciate your understanding of the success of India's vaccination drive. As you rightly pointed out, it is the same country where a person could not buy ration beyond the designated shop and it was our Government that brought in the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme.

Imagine if our country had not come up with a vaccine. What would be the situation? We know that a large population of the world doesn't have access to Covid vaccines. Today, our success in vaccination is thanks to India being *Atmanirbhar*.

Some years ago at a science conference, I said that it is time to move on from "*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Vigyan*" and work on the mantra of "*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Vigyan, Jay Anusandhan*". We had accorded top priority to research.

We started planning for the vaccination drive right in May 2020 when no vaccine was even close to approval anywhere in the world. We had decided as early as then that we did not want this vaccination drive to be run in the old way where it could take decades to vaccinate people. We wanted to run this in a fast, efficient, discretion-free and timebound manner.

But as the people of our country understand, vaccinating such a large number of people comes with its own share of complexities. Ensuring proper temperature control of vaccines, cold-chain infrastructure across the length and breadth of the country, timely deliveries from the manufacturing plant to the remotest vaccinating centre, supply of needles and syringes, training of vaccinators and preparing for adverse reactions, from quick registration to certificate generation to reminder for next appointment...And [smiles] in the midst of all this, we also had people who knowingly tried to create panic and anxiety. I can go on and on. There are so many things which went on behind the scenes of such a large initiative. We need to look at the entire logistics, planning and progress to understand the success of the vaccine drive. It is a huge effort with so many people mobilised across the country. I hope the media will take out time to highlight the efforts of our people in making the world's largest vaccination drive a stunning success.

We made sure that technology formed the backbone of the vaccination process. In the last seven years, we have leveraged technology as a means to save the poor from injustice. Our experience shows that it is the poor who get the maximum benefit of technology. Thanks to technology, the poor do not have to pay a bribe or stay behind in the queue to avail of services they rightfully deserve. They have equal rights as anyone else. Imagine a poor migrant who is now empowered to take his second dose of the same vaccine in the city he works in, even though he took the first dose in his village. Technology ensures that he gets the right vaccine at the right time and seamlessly.

We managed to save the lives of a large number of people during the pandemic. We also cannot forget those we have lost. For their families, it would be an irreparable loss. When we compare India's situation in the world, we have done better than many developed countries. However, we have in our midst vested interests whose only aim is to tarnish India's name. Covid-19 was a global scourge with all countries equally affected. In this scenario, India has done better than its peers and many developed countries, notwithstanding such negative campaigns. I have trust in our people and they have set an example for the world.

And the Government is constantly challenging holy cows. Ending geospatial monopoly is one big step in that direction. Map-making was once sacrosanct. You can now map ration shops, toilets, and so on. If someone creates a GPS-controlled app which tells you about the nearest toilet, it solves a big problem. What was your idea

"If we had changed our policies on maps on time, perhaps India could have become the global leader in map technology"

"This Digital Revolution is powered by people who were underestimated: pushcart vendors, small shopkeepers, *samosa* and *chaiwallas*"

when you thought about it? How do you plan to take this 'triangulation of India' forward?

I will share an old experience with you. Some 15-20 years ago, when the Sardar Sarovar Dam was being made, a lot of people used to visit it when there was a lot of water. But there were signboards there saying, "Photography Prohibited". I used to ask what is the use of banning photography when the same dam can be clearly seen in satellite imagery. I asked the logic of such a move. The system only said that this is the law. I decided that such laws have become irrelevant and need to change. Instead, I started a photography competition at the Sardar Sarovar Dam and as a result the dam became even more popular. We also started a nominal ticket for visiting the dam. It is a very heartening memory for me that we awarded the tourist number 5 lakh at the dam and it was a young couple from Baramullah.

See, I have got an experience of 20 years in governance as a head of government. But even before that, I have travelled far and wide and observed things very minutely.

If we had changed our policies on maps on time, perhaps India could have become the global leader in map technology. Instead, our policies remained archaic and our innovation-oriented and creative youth left the country for better opportunities.

"Unfortunately, independent commentators have also become accustomed to 'silos'. They have no idea what the results are of an 'integrated approach'"

"The biggest lesson from the Covid-19 fight is that India has an unparalleled ability to unite and a tremendous capacity to deliver when a need arises"

The youth of our country have an immense potential and spark in them. We must make them part of the process, part of the system, part of the decision-making apparatus.

We have often seen that the more different data sets become accessible, the more they become an asset. You can see this in our approach when we came up with NaVIC, a homegrown navigation system. Now with the reform on maps, it can significantly improve ease of living once our young innovators use them to make interesting products.

The reforms in geospatial technology will create economic opportunities for many startups and even businesses. Startups are often founded not on an idea, but to find a solution to a problem. Now, when we empower our youth to come up with their own products on maps, they will certainly solve problems being faced by our drivers and our entrepreneurs.

Our politics prioritises the divisions among Indians for electoral success. In the last seven years as prime minister, how difficult has it been for you to get unifying ideas accepted in the political system?

I would request you to hear my speeches, be it as chief minister of Gujarat or prime minister of India over the last 20 years.

What did I always say? Earlier when I was in Gujarat I said 6 crore Gujaratis...and now I say 130 crore Indians.

What does this imply? That when I am speaking, I speak for the entire population without a shred of discrimination.

Our development policies aim at complete saturation or 100 per cent—be it in electrification, housing, toilet coverage, among others. When the scale is this big, when we are aiming at complete transformation, where is the scope for discrimination? We are motivated by the mantra of *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat*.

Let me give you an example of a subject that has divided the nation for decades—that of reservation. Pick up the history books and you will see there were movements, counter-movements, so many painful events relating to this one issue of reservation.

But a few years ago when our Government had the honour to provide 10 per cent reservation to the poor from the general category, was there any bitterness? Did anyone protest? No. The decision was hailed across the social spectrum. Such a smooth process, without any protest, is a very big thing and something that deserves greater study by political scholars.

I will give you one more example.

Over two decades ago, the NDA Government under Atal Ji created three states. This was done with a spirit of cordiality. There were celebrations in the new states and in the states out of which the new states were carved. In contrast, see how the UPA Government handled the Telangana-Andhra Pradesh issue. The bitterness of their mismanagement lingers even now.

Let us talk about language, another subject that has divided people for decades. Due to frequent politicking, the importance of one's mother tongue kept getting reduced over the years. Our Government took a decision to impart medical and technical education in the local language. Forget causing divisions, this move was welcomed.

In the same spirit, let me mention something related to agriculture. Our Government has worked tirelessly for the small farmers. But does that mean we have taken decisions that are against the interest of the large farmers? Absolutely not.

We are striving to work for economic prosperity but we also believe in catering to the needs of ecology. Why do we do that? Because at the root of our thought process is the ideal of "*Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas, Sab ka Vishwas, Sab ka Prayas.*"

It is also rightly said—**'संघे शक्ति कलौ युगे'**—there is strength in unity.

What are the lessons about the state and preparedness of the healthcare system during the Covid-19 fight that you plan to now change and transform?

"Covid-19 was a global scourge. India has done better than its peers and many developed countries, notwithstanding negative campaigns"

"There is not a single sector where we have not brought fundamental reforms. We also created a conducive environment for state governments to introduce reforms"

The pandemic started in other countries before India. I was observing the global situation and trends. I could see confusion everywhere and also a lack of seriousness at an individual level. We knew that India would also be invariably affected. I started planning on how to bring the entire country on board for this. Eventually, it would be people's resolve and discipline that would matter and without it, it would be impossible to deal with this pandemic. It is then that the thought of Janata Curfew came to me. It spread the intended story far and wide. It is a big success story.

Similarly, in the pandemic, the biggest role was of the healthcare and frontline workers. There was a need to boost their morale. The banging of *thali*s and lighting of *diya*s became a big mass movement and it helped boost the morale of our healthcare workers. It can be a big case study. This also led to fewer cases of misbehaviour with medical personnel and respect for them went up. People saw medical personnel as gods in white coats.

My experience of 20 years as head of government says that people in government often underestimate people's power. When we trust their power and connect with them, we get results. The country has seen this during the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Give It Up, etcetera. I have seen this in my Gujarat days too.

The biggest difficulty of the governments in our country is the 'silos'. And unfortunately all the independent commentators have also become accustomed to silos. Because of this, they have no idea what are the results of an "integrated approach" and "whole of government approach".

The biggest thing that I have learned from my 20 years of experience in governance is that if I start something, I do not start it in isolation. There is a progressive unfolding of the vision and in the beginning I do not tell everything. Take the example of Jan Dhan accounts, people felt that it is just a financial inclusion programme. Take the example of Aadhaar, people felt that it was just an ID card. But at the time of this pandemic, when governments across the world wanted to send money to the needy, they were unable to do so. India was able to do it in the midst of a pandemic with the click of a button, crores of our mothers got money directly in their account.

It shows how our approach is integrated, holistic and futuristic.

And just like money was sent, foodgrains were made available to the needy and this scheme is still on. I heard somewhere that in the pandemic in the previous century, a large number of people died due to starvation. So, we were very conscious of this and in this hour of crisis, from the very first day, we have been giving free ration to such a big population for many months. One could easily make headlines by quoting the total money transferred when one gives cash, but ensuring that foodgrains reach the poor without corruption, without delay and without discretion for a long period of time is a big thing.

The biggest lesson for us from the Covid-19 fight has been that India has an unparalleled ability to unite, find a common purpose, come together, and a tremendous capacity to deliver when a need arises. From being a net importer of PPE kits, we have now become one of the biggest manufacturers across the globe. Similarly, we not only managed to exponentially increase the number of ventilators but also did so largely through domestic manufacturing. India achieved this despite limited global knowledge about the virus, the economic impact of lockdowns and existing state capacity constraints. Is there any better evidence of our ability to bring transformative change? In the last seven years, we have built a temperament of collective efforts for national goals. For us, it was clear in the last seven years that we can achieve tremendous results if we harness the latent energy of our citizens. But now, this has been a key learning for everyone I think.

Apart from this, the Covid-19 fight has also made us realise that we need to further strengthen our efforts for building world-class medical infrastructure. A lot of people today speak about the need to augment healthcare infrastructure. However, we need to remember that it cannot be merely done by adding more beds or rooms, it needs skilled and trained medical personnel. Over the last seven years, we have been actively working towards this. From six AIIMS in 2014, we are now building 22 AIIMS. From around 380 medical colleges in 2014, today we have around 560 medical colleges. From around 82 thousand undergraduate and postgraduate medical seats, we now have around 1 lakh 40 thousand undergraduate and postgraduate medical seats. Recently, we came out with a scheme to help states ramp up medical infrastructure in all categories, including paediatric facilities. We are also working on launching a massive scheme to boost health infrastructure that will address a lot of legacy issues.

Another key realisation for everyone has been to look at the health sector holistically. We are actively focusing on preventive healthcare. From improved sanitation to water supply, from yoga to Ayurveda, from strengthening diagnostic centres in remote areas, we are doing it all.

We realised the importance of Telemedicine and, at the beginning of the pandemic, we came out with a policy on Telemedicine and removed all the restrictions that it had. Recently, we have launched the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM). It will enhance access to healthcare for the poor, boost innovation and make treatments seamless across geographies. ■

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives at the Red Fort in New Delhi to deliver his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2020

AFP

THE MAN THE MIND THE MISSION

The remaking of India

By PR RAMESH

NARENDRA MODI IS a leader overtly partial to the big picture, the complete, overarching plot of policymaking and its wider impact on life, as India knows it. He plumps for the long shots, the panoramic sweeps, and then zooms in on specific details. By October 7th this year, he would have clocked two decades in government, starting his journey as chief minister of Gujarat by replacing Keshubhai Patel at the helm of affairs.

By the time the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) asked him to head to Gandhinagar from New Delhi and take over the government in Gujarat, the then chief minister's popularity had nosedived significantly after his poor handling of Gujarat's recovery from a terrible earthquake. It was essentially going to be an ambulance-chasing job for Modi. Or, so it seemed. But BJP trusted Modi's incredible organisational abilities and believed that he stood a good chance at resuscitating the party before the February 2003 Assembly election. Among the first things he did was to rally the troops and, in a singularly morale-boosting move, announce that they had some 500-odd days to gird their loins and prepare for victory.

> In his two decades in the executive, Modi has raised the bar so high for future leaders—on policymaking both at home and abroad—that emulating him is likely to be both inescapable and a mammoth task

Modi had joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the late 1960s and became a *pracharak* in the early 1970s and was later promoted to Prant Pracharak. In the early 1990s, the then party president LK Advani recognised his talents, enrolled him in BJP and put him in charge of the Rath Yatra which began at Somnath. Modi was also a key organiser of Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra and a magnetic speaker. It was here that he concentrated his indomitable energy and style of marrying RSS' organising abilities with BJP's political objectives, from the ground upwards, starting with local body elections. BJP's historic win in the state elections subsequently, breaking the stranglehold of Congress, was one wherein every party stalwart had to acknowledge Modi's key role in the electoral triumph of 1995 that got BJP 121 seats in the 182-strong state Assembly.

If he decidedly preferred the widescreen to define his political ideas while helming his home state, Modi's definite choice of canvas to express his long-term political, social and cultural vision at the national level was the 70mm. He hit the ground running in 2014, after taking charge as the country's prime minister, as if he had realised clearly that he needed a tour de force to make up for precious time wasted over the last seven-plus decades of independence. To right the wrongs and rework the map of India on multiple levels. He had a distinct storyline in mind to regain what he believed was the rightful place—for a subcontinent of rich heritage and glorious history—in the global hierarchy and among the most powerful in its pecking order. His macro-view entailed a course correction that would harness the best of the political, social and cultural traditions of the subcontinent and knit it seamlessly with the cutting-edge practices of the 21st century.

To realise his vision of a "New India", Modi was not afraid to take the road less travelled, to break the mould, to think outside the box despite being a newbie in the elite political matrix of Lutyens' Delhi. He set big, seemingly unachievable targets and remained undeterred by the risk of being judged by their unbearable weightiness. His critics made that the sole criterion for evaluating the limits of his success as prime minister. But he defied the shrill partisan carping and went about spelling out new goals, targets and objectives on a wide range of sectors from the economy, homeland security and international diplomacy to relations with neighbours. Modi's decision and policies upped the game for India on multiple fronts at home, in the region and globally, radically changing expectations of what India could or should achieve. Propelled by the ambitious canvas that its prime minister was painting on and the headline markers he was setting for the country, India began to defy the very soft bigotry of low expectations that had defined it thus far. In the two decades of his stint in the executive, Modi has raised the bar so high for political leaders of the future—on policymaking both at home and abroad—that emulating his vision is likely to be both inescapable and a mammoth task for most.

Globally, he chose to engage proactively and at an elevated level with the biggies, including the US, Russia, Japan, the UK and France. He had little hesitation—without publicly severing India's umbilical cord with the Cold War relic of a comatose Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)—in signing on to the US-led Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) where he called out Beijing for its expansionism and sided with those aiming to keep the Indo-Pacific region free of any one power's influence. This was sheer audacity on the part of a country that has traditionally been wary of Beijing's frowns. Stunned, the communist dictatorship has openly voiced its anger at a regional cooperation platform being used to "target" it.

Modi also played a proactive role in BRICS, a group of influential emerging economies—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—acknowledged internationally as playing a significant part in regional affairs. In South Asia, he aggressively sought to isolate Pakistan for its brazen and continued terror activities in India. For the first time in decades, he took a calculated political risk through a covert surgical strike operation and chose to hit back inside Pakistani territory. The Balakot airstrike, a top secret operation carried out under cover of darkness, was a watershed in India-Pakistan relations, immeasurably boosting the collective political and cultural confidence of a nation that had quietly suffered a thousand cuts from the hostile neighbour. Modi did not just use military force to rein in Pakistan but also a menu of options hitherto unexplored. By a skilful application of the levers of international diplomacy, India made creative use of the international terror funding watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), to shackle Pakistan and control its use of terrorism—an impressive achievement. Who would have thought of leveraging a little-known mechanism to bend Pakistan and expose China's support for the military intelligence-jihadist Rawalpindi *shura*?

Then Modi took China head-on. In May 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stopped Indian soldiers from patrolling up to their claim lines in Ladakh and put up permanent structures on its side. It had amassed a massive 60,000 troops close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), in violation of the rules of engagement, gravely endangering the status quo. As tensions escalated, the death of 20 Indian soldiers in Galwan Valley in June embarrassed the Modi Government. The retaliation from India came through a cocktail of economic, diplomatic and military actions. Modi imposed economic sanctions on Chinese firms in India, despite trade dependency, with a view to hit China's technological interests in Indian markets. Next, Chinese apps were banned and Chinese state-owned companies were barred from investing in infrastructure projects. Then, Huawei's interests in India's 5G infrastructure were threatened. In tandem, New Delhi signed a military cooperation agreement with the US, even inviting Australia to joint naval exercises and sending an Indian destroyer to the South China Sea where nations from the Philippines to Vietnam have been battling Chinese aggression. This was a major shift from the wary diplomatic pussyfooting done by previous governments for decades, separating trade issues from the larger issue of Chinese aggression on the LAC.

Modi's moves allowed India to thwart China's plans to promote its own social media giants who, apart from illegally hoarding the personal details of unsuspecting millions here, would also have deployed by the "wolf warriors" to promote China's soft power and its version of authoritarianism. That plan failed. ByteDance is back in play now and the Chinese apps have managed to enter the market under different disguises. But India's actions showcased the Government's decision to hit back from unexpected places, even becoming a model for the Trump administration in the US. Curbs on Huawei, under Modi's own retaliatory strategy, do not any longer appear to be an outrageous xenophobic idea as they once seemed. As prime minister, Modi was not overwhelmed by the possibility of consequences and boldly junked the doctrine so proudly tom-tommed by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) which preferred to show cowardice on the LAC even while allowing China to flood local markets with everything from fairy lights for Diwali, Ganesha idols, cheap shoes, mobile chargers, components for DTH dishes and tonnes of garlic from Guangdong. For years, UPA posited this as an exercise in realpolitik.

When dealing with China, Modi was fully aware that ensuring tactical gains on the ground and not relying solely on military deterrence was how advantage could be wrested from Beijing. In a first, Modi visited troops in the Ladakh region and, boosting their morale significantly, lashed out at China's "expansionist" moves. The crucial Kailash Range provides a major strategic advantage to India, nullifying the gains made by the PLA in the Depsang Plains, Hot Springs-Gogra and north of Pangong Tso. This is the one place where the 1959 claim line gives a strategic advantage to India. It is here that the Modi Government turned its attention to amassing both personnel and equipment. It is considered the biggest mobilisation of the Indian armed forces in recent decades. In a late-August 2020 pre-emptive move, the Indian Army captured the dominant features of the Kailash Range, giving it a vantage view of China's positions on both the north and south banks of the Pangong Tso lake. Indian forces also captured the north bank of the lake, leaving the PLA stuck in the lower reaches. Both moves gave India the tactical advantage in the conflict on the LAC and hiked the costs for the Chinese in holding their positions. For the first time since 1962, India was holding the position of strength. By February 10th this year, both India and China began disengaging from what has been described as "the bloodiest (if not the longest) crisis on the Sino-Indian border in the last 50 years," at Pangong Tso (declared a buffer zone), and returning to their permanent bases although tensions persist at other sites in eastern Ladakh. Essentially, this meant that the PLA would get out of what India claims is its side of the LAC. This was a key success, the first after the 2017 Doklam crisis where, again, China had to pull back its military.

PRIORITISING PRAGMATISM over outdated Cold War positioning, Modi also jettisoned existing qualms in India about being seen as dumping the forum of non-aligned nations by moving closer to the US and proactively enrolled in the informal Quad grouping of nations with a view to pushing back against growing Chinese aggression. In November 2017, India, Japan, the US and Australia gave shape to the long-pending proposal of setting up the Quad. He openly positioned India with the US and invited Australia for joint naval exercises. Both Japan and Australia are big trade partners with China and calling out Beijing for its expansionism, whether in the South China Sea or on the LAC, or even backing a priority probe into the alleged origins of the coronavirus in China and possible sanctions, were, therefore, not backed with gusto by all the members. But Modi upped the ante on China within the Quad.

The boldness overseas was an extension of the courage Modi showed and the risks he took at home in attacking a political economy whose wheels were greased with black money. In late-2016, Modi dealt a body blow to an entrenched black money ecosystem that debilitated India's economic health by declaring ₹500 and ₹1000 notes illegal. The assault on illegal money and fraud currency, or demonetisation, was not simply about retrieving national wealth from the corrupt. It was a crusade against the prevailing culture that normalised black money as necessary to grease the wheels of the economy and viewed any fight against it as futile. Modi streamlined banking and radically redefined the tax regime. He reworked a desultory public distribution system (PDS) and focused aggressively on the delivery of food and welfare measures, including electricity, schooling, potable water, sanitation, cooking gas, for the disadvantaged and underprivileged; strengthened infrastructure, including roads and highways, railways and accessible civil aviation; increased domestic production of edible oil and pulses, as well as support prices for agricultural produce; and revamped and upgraded farm infrastructure through active private sector participation.

An ardent believer in New India making a mark in space and the scientific realm, Modi flummoxed his critics by setting new benchmarks in space exploration and aggressively promoting scientific missions. Again, defying the label of a rightwing cultural nationalist critics were determined to pin on him, Modi did not mimic the strident Covid-19 scepticism of other nationalist heads of state or government like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. Instead, banking on India's strength on the pharmaceutical and vaccine fronts, he chose to put his trust in scientists and experts when faced with the trials engendered by the global pandemic on an unprecedented scale. With a population next only to China's, a public health infrastructure worse than those of many other emerging nations and extremely strained resources, India was considered a sitting duck for the rapid spread of the virus. Today, the battle against the shape-shifting Wuhan-origin virus is far from over. The second wave was decidedly deadly and ravaged thousands of families. But it is safe to say India has fared far better than the projections made by reputed epidemiologists, virologists and partisan public health experts who mushroomed overnight and whose opinions were lapped up eagerly by the commentariat. This was possible because of the steady and creative leadership of Modi. He led from the front and, as counsellor-in-chief, exhorted people to maintain "*do gaj ki doori*", keep their masks on and avoid crowded places. He became 'consoler'-in-chief for the thousands who lost their loved ones in the second wave. Disregarding the apprehensions of his well-wishers who warned him that he was exposing himself to the risk of failure, he plunged into daily exhorting of vaccine-makers and rallying health personnel to redouble their efforts against Covid. And he urged ordinary citizens to valorise Covid warriors, repurposed police personnel and, above all, boosted the morale of people faced with an unprecedented threat to life and livelihood.

AP

Narendra Modi participates in a mass yoga event on the first International Yoga Day in New Delhi, June 21, 2015

Confronting an exponential hike in the demand for oxygen during the second wave, Modi came up with innovative solutions to remove emerging hurdles. From flagging off the Oxygen Express through the railways to personally handholding and inspiring Indian vaccine-makers like Bharat Biotech to accelerate work on an indigenous vaccine against Covid, to ramping-up the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) kits and medicines, including Ivermectin and other drugs, through various ministries, Modi has today ensured that at least 75 per cent of India has received at least one dose of the Covid jab. It did not end there. Aware that the worst hit in his country during the lockdown and pandemic would be the neediest, Modi initiated urgent measures to ensure that free foodgrain and other essentials would reach the poor during a severe lockdown that deprived them of their livelihoods. The emergency decision to transfer foodgrains to beneficiaries across India on a priority basis was aimed at warding off the very real threat of starvation in the bleakest months of the pandemic.

The seamless movement of food and money to the needy could not have been successfully managed were it not for Aadhaar and digitalisation, both of which Modi has espoused wholeheartedly despite immense criticism. Digitalisation reform in India, one of Modi's revolutionary pet projects and among his most ambitious, was launched in September 2015 with the idea of making the nation digitally empowered, with significant internet connectivity. The plan was to make internet-based documentation, cutting across sectors such as agriculture, health, employment, legal and crime-related information, banking, education and so on, completely paper-free but, more crucially, transparent, accessible and seamless. It would move India from an era of cumbersome, heavily bureaucratic and corruption-ridden processes involving governance and the citizen to an age that has cut out all the clutter. Had it not been for the massive fillip to digitalisation of the economy, one of the key outcomes of the demonetisation of higher value notes in end-2016, the destruction caused by the coronavirus could well have been unimaginable. In urban India, too, it was digitalisation that ensured work from home (WFH) models for companies and a sustained online delivery of both grocery essentials and medicines.

Traversing a largely uncharted pandemic era in which nations the world over grappled with uncertainties, disease, death and disaster, Modi grasped the baton firmly to be among the earliest of world leaders to announce a stringent lockdown in the first wave that, despite intense criticism, proved to be a key reason why unprecedented mass infections and deaths were averted in a nation of 1.3 billion people. He reinvigorated and inspired a laggard private sector—in a nation known as the vaccine-maker to the world but sorely lacking the initiative and resolve—to both produce vaccines at home and meet enormous never-before and overnight needs for jabs, ICU beds and oxygen cylinders; he re-envisioned and cranked-up a near-decrepit public health system that has now resulted in 88 crore Indians getting their vaccination as of September 30th. Overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds on often politically engineered vaccine scepticism and cynicism in his ability, he rose to inspire ordinary citizens, private and public hospitals, epidemiologists and virologists, vaccine-makers, pharmacists and producers of medical grade oxygen in the battle against Covid, even when ensuring the economy did not slide southward irrevocably.

Striking a delicate balance between containing the rapid spread of the virus and yet keeping the economy from collapsing would be a mammoth task anywhere. But in a nation with the second-largest population, this has proved to be practically miraculous. Undoubtedly, the economy took a hard hit but the green shoots of recovery have already started manifesting in tandem with the Modi Government tailoring its policy decisions and responses through 17-plus months of unimaginable Covid travails, including on the crucial employment and education fronts. The latter directly impacted thousands of school-going kids, especially those from underprivileged communities. However, schools in several states have finally started reopening gradually, with Covid-preventive norms prioritised, even as other developed nations go into a third lockdown and shut down schools again after reopening them earlier. In fact, India's achievements in the Covid era have proved to be exemplary when compared with even the US, the world's only superpower.

In Modi's worldview, there was a direct connection between the battle against Covid and the bold steps on other fronts that he took to improve the livelihoods of India's people, such as his espousal of digitalisation and formalisation of the economy and creative diplomacy. He saw all of these decisions as the foundation of a modern, caring, assertive, strong and prosperous India that he had conceived. Equally, he was convinced that the India of his imagination would not be possible unless people regained pride in their heritage and culture.

A sense of cultural inferiority that had gripped the people in the wake of a series of invasions marked by mass killings, plunder, assault on the faith and culture of Hindus was an aggressively promoted campaign by the British. Unfortunately, that worldview was furthered as brutally under the left-liberal dispensation that followed Independence and sapped the confidence of a people and pride in their collective history and heritage. In his seven years at the helm, Modi has led a national effort to shake off that pusillanimity by emphasising the uniqueness and achievements of one of the world's ancient civilisations. Contrary to projections by critics, his was never an exercise in narcissism but a concerted effort to revive a national spirit by invoking cultural imagery and traditions long derided in the name of modernity, secularism and a strangely labelled "composite culture". It is decolonisation of the Indian mind, but with a strong class component that seeks to demolish a normalised culture of promoting only those from privileged backgrounds in the name of a "secular, scientific and modern outlook". This institutionalised culture had, since Independence, shut out from the echelons of power those who did not comply with the prevailing ethos and subscribe to the vision professed by the thought commissars of institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jadavpur University.

IT IS WITH THIS vision of a forward-looking cultural nationalism in mind that, on the socio-political front, Modi prioritised mainstreaming India's largest minority through a variety of decisions. After taking charge in Delhi, he called out the politically institutionalised and electorally motivated exploitation of minority 'vote banks' by the so-called secular parties and leaders. Modi's great success at the hustings rested on a calculated strategy of demolishing hidebound caste firewalls, neutralising the so-called 'Muslim veto' in several constituencies across India and quashing the minority appeasement regularised by previous regimes, mainly Congress and the so-called social justice parties. He proactively pushed through legislation to criminalise regressive, anti-women practices like the Triple Talaq, which failed to be addressed by political parties subscribing to minority appeasement, and ushered in modern education curricula at madrasas to ensure an environment for mainstreaming the largest minority in the country. These decisions cut out the ground beneath politicians allegedly working for minority betterment but routinely marginalising Muslim voters for political gains.

Modi's boldness of vision extends to crucial issues of global concern today, such as climate change. He mooted the idea of a global alliance of solar-power rich nations as far back as 2015. This September, the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, said that his country would decide on whether to join the India-led International Solar Alliance (ISA) of 124 countries (conceived by Modi) before the UN climate change meet in Glasgow on October 31st. India's aggressive push towards efficient consumption of solar energy and reducing dependence on fossil fuels has been nodal in achieving set targets, which earlier looked impossible. India is now on track to achieve the goal of 450 GW by 2030, relying heavily on solar power. On the ground, the roadmap has translated into far more affordable and accessible photovoltaic cells. It is estimated that the developments will lead the way for the country to reach the below-2 degree level, more than even what was committed to in the Paris Climate Accord. Modi has ensured that from being perennially perceived as a laggard state, India has emerged as a climate-change leader.

Modi's inclination to think big and act ambitiously on the global stage has also enhanced India's stature in the UN Security Council (UNSC). India had the opportunity to chair the Security Council earlier too, but never before had it the forced the council to pass a resolution, abstentions by China and Russia notwithstanding. India managed to achieve satisfaction in UNSC Resolution 2593 in August regarding its key concerns on Afghanistan. The resolution called on the Taliban to prevent terror groups from operating in Afghanistan and ensure safe evacuations for all Afghan nationals wanting to leave the country, after careful coordination with UNSC members and consultations with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Russia, one of the P5 nations that abstained, insisted that with more time and better consultation, the resolution would have reflected the role of the US occupation of Afghanistan for 20 years and the rise of the Taliban in the current crisis. China, too, said the resolution was not balanced. India will soon also chair a panel on sanctions on the Taliban and will have to balance perspectives from Russia and China against those of the US, the UK and France.

Modi proudly owned, even flaunted, his Hindu moorings. This went hand in hand, without any contradiction, with the prime minister's push to issues as diverse as space exploration and gender justice

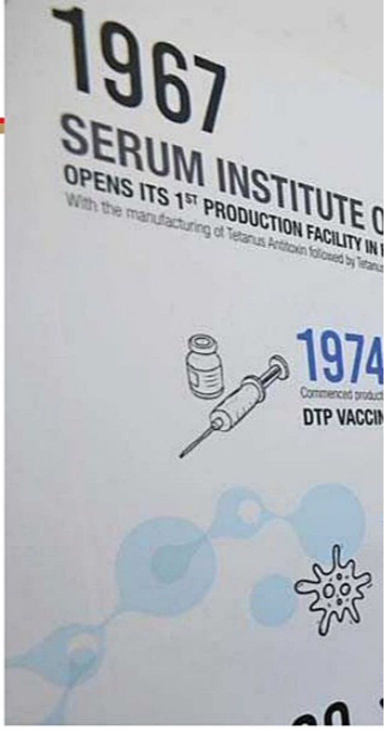
Post-liberalisation, India was being perceived as experimentative and exploratory, willing to find options on every front. But the type of nimble-footedness and versatility that Modi inspired in the menu of options, and the willingness to play on a bigger, more powerful stage, as much at home as on the global front, was missing until he took over as prime minister.

In November 8th, 2016, Narendra Modi stunned the nation by declaring that ₹500 and ₹1,000 notes would be demonetised (removed from circulation as legal tender). Modi came to power in 2014 on the promise that he would wage a war against black money and the announcement was meant to be a crusade against illegal wealth and the cancer it had unleashed in the nation's economy. It struck a chord with most ordinary Indians and appealed to their anathema for corruption and illegal wealth accumulation. Nothing as bold as this and on this scale ("draining the swamp") had ever been attempted before. In 2017, the parallel (black/illegal) economy of India was estimated at half of India's current GDP of $2.60 trillion.

Modi set a 50-day target for exchanging the old notes for new ones—aiming at attacking black money and nullifying tax evasion and monetary fraud—to allow the cash-dependent sectors of the economy ample time to find their feet again. The narrative, which started as an avowed no-holds-barred war on black money, currency fraud and terror funding soon outlined far grander objectives, including transforming India significantly from a non-tax-compliant to a tax-compliant society by formalising the massive informal economy and taking giant strides towards a less cash dependent and more digitalised economy. Studies based on tax compliance and collection two years before demonetisation and two years after clearly showed a noticeable uptick in personal income tax, corporate tax and other direct taxes. Direct tax to GDP ratio showed an increase, but the biggest growth was in the buoyancy factor, which is seen as the growth of tax in relation to growth in GDP. The sharpest hike in the buoyancy factor was seen in personal income tax collections. In November 2018, two years after the demonetisation exercise, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said that it had proved to be a key step by the Government in formalising the economy. In 2020, four years after the ban on high-denomination notes, 3.8 lakh companies and 4.5 lakh directors flouting rules were struck off under relevant sections of the Companies Act. Cumulatively, a survey conducted by the tax authorities in 63,691 cases revealed undisclosed income of about ₹85,000 crore, according to Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) Krishnamurthy Subramanian.

Post-demonetisation in 2016, Modi had come in for intense criticism, with heavy accusations of untold hardship inflicted on the livelihoods of citizens and blows dealt to the economy. Months later, the Government successfully detected ₹1,14,110 crore in black money, including money under the Government's income disclosure scheme (₹74,350), *benami* transactions (₹4,300 crore) and income tax raids (₹35,460 crore). It also included a fall (₹12,139 crore) in money stashed by Indians in Swiss banks since 2014. Arguments persisted as to whether this was enough black money detection to put a stop to the massive parallel economy fuelled by it. But when the scorecard was out, it was clear that India had made its boldest ever bid to check black money and currency fraud and, besides, had moved significantly towards a far less cash dependent economy compared to pre-2016 days, as well as the fact that terror funding had become much harder, leading to fewer terror incidents. And digitalisation had gathered significant momentum.

Months after the note-ban exercise, a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) study said: "Post demonetisation, there has been a marked reduction in the resistance towards digital payments, and this medium should continue to see sustained adoption going forward." Referring to the exponential rise in digital payments, it said, "One of the talking points of the digital payments story has been the phenomenal growth witnessed by new age instruments such as Unified Payments Interface (UPI), prepaid payment instruments (PPIs), Aadhaar Enabled Payment System (AEPS), along with well-established ones such as National Electronic Fund Transfer (NEFT), Real Time Gross Settlement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(RTGS) and cards (debit, credit)".

According to KPMG's 'Pulse of Fintech H1'21' report, far from triggering a downtrend, the Covid-19 pandemic boosted the digital ecosystem in India phenomenally as proved by the increased investor activity in the fintech sector. India attracted $2 billion in fintech investment in the January-June period of 2021. For the full year of 2020, investment remained at $2.7 billion, the second highest amount ever compared to the 2019 peak of $3.5 billion. "The attractiveness of the country's fintech sector for investors has been focused around digital payments, followed by insurtech, several of whom raised mid-sized VC or PE funding rounds in H1, 2021." The bi-annual report of KPMG further said: "Finech valuations remained very high in H1'21 as investors continued to see the space as attractive and well-performing. This likely drove the explosion of unicorn births in the first half of 2021." Simultaneously, there is greater focus on cyber security to reinforce transparency and safety in online transactions. An increased trend in formalisation of the economy has also spawned a new type of entrepreneurship. It is no one's argument that this would not have happened, but it would have happened at a leisurely pace. India is today among those countries where there is a growing number of unicorns and the world is looking for safer ventures because of developments in China, including its cyber attacks on online giants.

Digitalisation also made a telling impact on the delivery of the Government's welfare schemes to intended beneficiaries like never before. In mid-2020, policy experts made a fervent plea for the widening of the welfare schemes based on leveraging the efficiency of digitalisation. Crediting existing leakages in the welfare network to those delivering the benefits, they maintained, "Implementing the JAM trinity has helped lower transaction costs, reduce leakages and reach beneficiaries quickly. Aadhaar can prevent identity frauds. Our sophisticated payments infrastructure enables DBT. The speed at which the MGNREGA payments are made to beneficiaries has improved more than threefold since 2015. Pilots for the One Nation, One Ration Card project have shown that inter state portability is possible." This write-up was in the context of a mid-round survey of 47,000 households, mostly Below Poverty Line (BPL) across 15 states, which they had commissioned. The survey aimed at finding out if the Government's Covid relief schemes were working successfully and what the gaps were that needed filling. Based on all the surveys and studies on digitalisation, Modi—who had already inspired a relatively entitled middle class to voluntarily give up cooking gas subsidies and participate proactively in largescale programmes like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, even prioritising building toilets through subsidies in disadvantaged homes, and in micro and cottage businesses—took the big step of enlarging the size of a moribund welfare state by ringing in headline schemes like Ayushman Bharat, the Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, the Jan Dhan Yojana, the MUDRA Yojana, the Suraksha Bima Yojana, old-age pension under the National Social Assistance Scheme (NSAP), Namami Gange and the Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana. Then there were the broad-scale, high-profile campaigns and programmes like Start-Up India, Make in India, Digital India, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, and, of course, Swachh Bharat. During both his first and second terms as prime minister, Modi has simultaneously ensured a strong and direct connect between him, the welfare schemes initiated by him and the beneficiaries, monitored by a network of Government officials and party functionaries at the local level. That connect has directly impacted his personal image across the country as an empowering, stridently welfarist, well-intentioned and incorruptible leader.

Modi led from the front and, as counsellor-in-chief, exhorted people to maintain '*do gaj ki doori*', keep their masks on and avoid crowded places. He became consoler-in-chief for the thousands who lost their loved ones in the second wave

The term "Hindutva" has been around since VD Savarkar, an avowed atheist who had coined it and imbued it with strong tones of an inclusive cultural nationalism based on the shared history and traditions of the people of the subcontinent. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Advani was BJP's Hindutva mascot. By then, the dominant political narrative on Hindutva was seen as an exclusively Hindu-centric worldview. But neither Advani nor his colleague Atal Bihari Vajpayee was able to assertively redefine the term, given the prevailing and dominant socio-political environment at the time, as one that primarily sought to unite Indians on the basis of civilisational and cultural traditions. Events during Modi's tenure as Gujarat's chief minister may have sorely tested his beliefs and put him through a proverbial trial by fire. Modi, however, came through unscathed and with a firmer resolve. Once in charge in Delhi, he not only owned Hindutva proudly as an inclusive concept but also, for the first time in independent India, emerged as a prime minister who owned his Hindu upbringing and traditions in public as much as in private. He performed the ground-breaking ceremony for the proposed temple at Ayodhya in August 2020, his first visit there as prime minister, and point-

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Modi at the Serum Institute of India, November 28, 2020

edly linked the struggle for India's freedom with the beginnings of the resurrection of the temple. Lord Ram, he said, is the thread that made sense of India's unity in diversity. He made very public visits to the Kedarnath temple in Uttarakhand, the Guruvayur temple in Kerala, the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi after his 2019 electoral victory, the Shiva temple in Oman, the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu or the Matua temple in Bangladesh prior to the West Bengal elections. At the same time, he calculatedly chose to create a non-controversial environment for the courts to resolve the sensitive issue of the demolition of the disputed structure at Ayodhya and the construction of a grand new temple edifice at the birthplace of Lord Ram. It was his way of dedicating the *mandir* to all of India and its people. In all of this, Modi did not cosmetically redefine but fundamentally realigned the state's concept of secularism, not merely opting for an enabling environment to move Hindutva as a concept centrestage. It was a radical socio-cultural and political decision that showcased an elevated new Hindutva for the modern age, jettisoning the rigidity and hidebound conservatism earlier associated with the concept. Modi's Hindutva was forward-looking and foundational for his idea of New India. It changed India's thinking and the ordinary Indian's view of himself, imbuing a telling 'Can Do' spirit where it was sorely missing. It was a belief that egged the country to embrace new ideas, shedding its lethargy and diffidence. It was a belief that allowed India to embrace entrepreneurial ideas such as unicorns, persisting undaunted in battling the pandemic despite the challenges, pushing a homegrown Bharat Biotech to take on the mammoth task of making vaccines for a nation of 1.3 billion people. Modi's Hindutva not merely triggered a symbolic, or flag-waving, nationalism but also instilled a deeper awareness of and pride in things civilisational. If British historians and sociologists had portrayed Indians as pusillanimous and weak-kneed and if a warped interpretation of secularism post-Independence had compounded the humiliation of the Hindu Indian, Modi's Hindutva worldview has translated on the ground into a newfound confidence among Indians for the first time. The first efforts at decolonising the Hindu mind came from Swami Vivekananda. But the juggernaut of reclaiming and reasserting Hinduism charioted by Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo had been stopped in its tracks even before it rolled by Lord Macaulay who had already weaponised Christian missionaries through the state in the 19th century. Post-Independence, Nehruvian socialism and secularism further impeded the gains in reviving pride in Sanatan Dharma. The prevailing thinking became not just one of glorifying Christianity and everything associated with Islam but also denigrating the rich matrix of cultural and social traditions associated with Hindus.

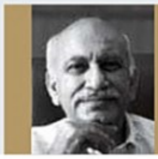
MODI CHANGED ALL that when he rode to victory in May 2014. Suddenly, all the incentives to demonise Hinduism vanished as Modi proudly owned, even flaunted, his Hindu moorings. At the Ganga Aarti in Varanasi, he sat through a prolonged conch-blowing and recital of scripture. He openly advocated the reconstruction of the temples in Ayodhya and Kashi considered holy by millions. For lakhs of youth, not just in rural India but among the middle class in urban India, Modi's example engendered an unapologetic endorsement of their Hindu heritage. The result was a confident re-Hinduisation, a predominance of guilt-free devotion to the Hindu religion. This went hand in hand, without any contradiction, with the prime minister's push to issues as diverse as space exploration and gender justice. For instance, Ritu Karidhal became the first woman chief of a crucial space mission. Modernity and progressiveness went hand-in-hand with pride in civilisational moorings. In tandem, Modi proactively mainstreamed Muslim Indians through a clutch of decisions such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and criminalising Triple Talaq by law. Then, on August 5th, 2019, he brought two resolutions related to Jammu and Kashmir. The first nullified Article 370 which accorded special status to the state, a longstanding demand of a majority of Indians.

Since 2014, the prime minister's strident critics have doubled down and devoted reams and tomes to pull him down, steadfastly denying him his due. However, Narendra Modi had overcome seemingly unbeatable odds in life on his road to becoming the prime minister of India, with a personality that itself bore the potential to fire ambitions. He came from a humble background, brought up by a mother who worked as a domestic help and was himself a 'tea boy' in a society that stigmatised his MBC caste. As destiny would have it, he chose to be the first male member of the family to flaunt his surname of Modi even as his uncles took on Sanskritised surnames to disguise their caste. And Modi rose to the position of the nation's CEO, triumphing over an entrenched cultural milieu designed to only help the upper crust and the privileged succeed in life. Now, his inimitable desire to think on a grand scale and his body of work in political life are proving to be a key catalyst in inspiring the aspirational youth from not-so-privileged backgrounds who are no longer apologetic about their life or their ambitions.

Modi reimagined India. And under his baton, India is reimagining itself. ■

WHY MODI WINS

He understands that a political party survives on ideology, but ideology withers if it is not nourished by ideas that work



By MJ AKBAR

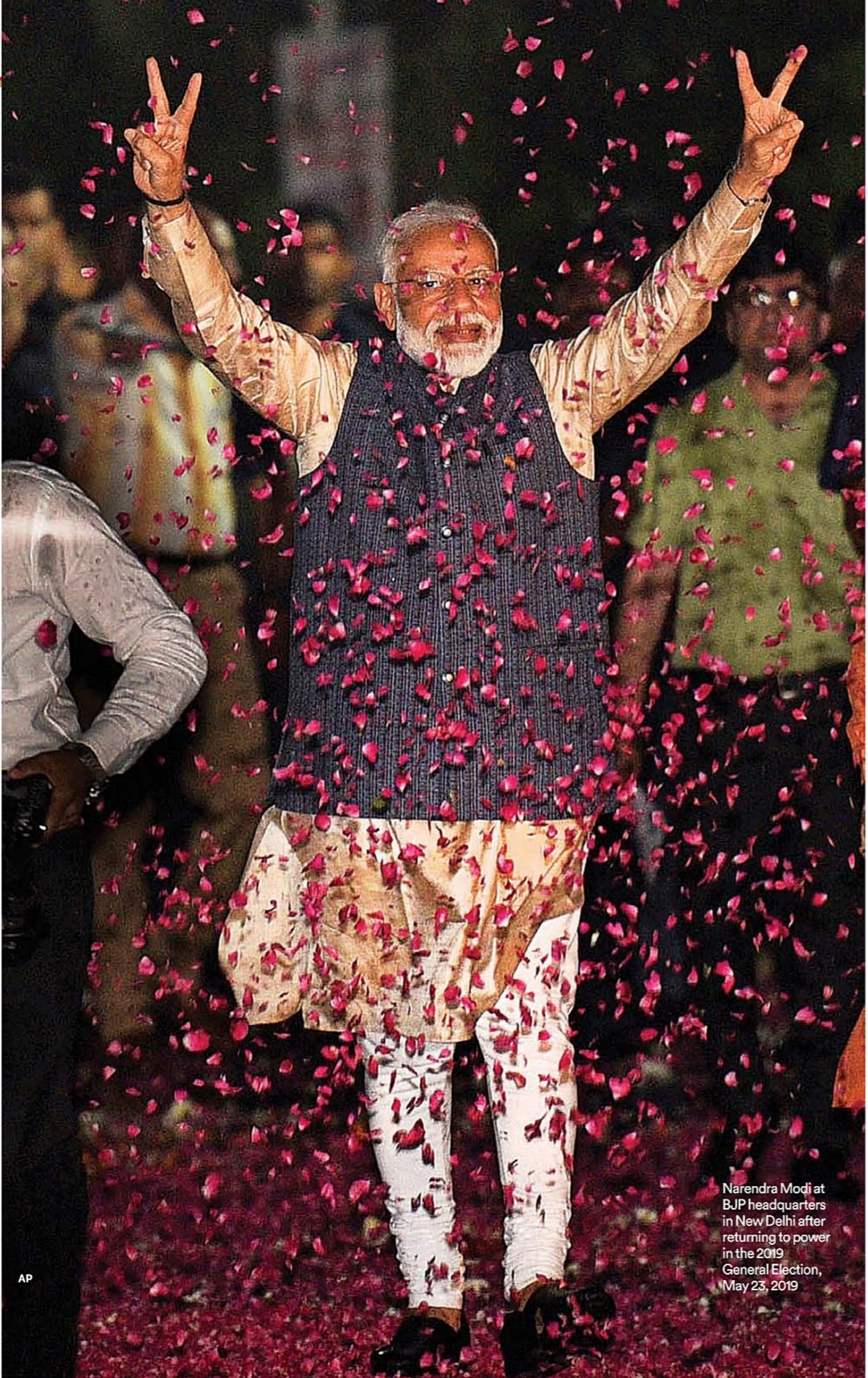
EVERY CAMPAIGN IS the end-product of a long period of gestation in which observation, experience, analysis and instinct are employed to find the best answer to a critical collateral question: Where has the Indian voter reached on the trajectory of individual and collective aspiration?

There is never a one-point answer to this conundrum. Every voter in each election wants a better life. That is normal. But he or she may also seek disruptive policies as a shortcut to that goal, or believe in varying degrees of emotional consolation through an identity security blanket, or respond to the negative stimulation of aggressive social conflict. Such multiple demands are graded in priority but can coexist despite contradictions. The qualitative difference that Prime Minister Modi brings to the electoral exercise is that he synchronises what is required by the individual with what is essential for the nation. Like everyone else in public life, he wants to win. But he wins a General Election because he places the national interest above electoral compromise.

The prime minister was 50 when he entered electoral politics as Gujarat's unexpected chief minister at the turn of the 21st century. He had prepared for this moment for at least a decade from the anonymous shadow of the sidelines. No public figure absorbed lessons from the difficult decades—the 1980s and 1990s—better than Narendra Modi. He witnessed the critical challenge to the nation's unity from ethnic forces abetted by hostile powers, and the volcanic turbulence which tore apart an Indian economy already weakened by a decrepit doctrinaire approach to policy decisions. Violence drained opportunities for a generation.

Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao—now considered one of the greats but much derided by his own party when he was in office between 1991 and 1996—did rescue India from economic collapse with brave reforms but was rejected by the electorate because he could not find a persuasive narrative that assuaged turbulent sentiment while releasing India's economic potential. Rao also had the misfortune to represent a party which had entered historical decline. He could not reform Congress in the way he reformed the economy.

Narendra Modi understood that a pivotal shift had taken place in Indian democracy after three decades of social turmoil provoked by politics. Power in the 21st century would go to those who delivered equitable governance, not those who disguised



AP

Narendra Modi at BJP headquarters in New Delhi after returning to power in the 2019 General Election, May 23, 2019 their ambitions behind the fog of false emotionalism. 'Equitable' was as important in this phrase as 'governance'. This did not eliminate social issues from public discourse, but it completely reversed the proportion.

There was a subtler change. As the focus on conventional politics diminished, so did the attraction of a politician whose *raison d'être* had been restricted to the stilted enclosures of community, caste or creed. These factors were still important in the voter psychology and electoral matrix. They could bring you to the fore. But they alone could no longer ensure victory.

Equitable and productive development was the only insurance policy for the support of a generation that came of age after 2000. This generation responded with devotion and affection for Narendra Modi in Gujarat, and then carried him with enthusiasm and hope on to the national stage. Modi won Gujarat because he turned the unpredictable crisis of an earthquake on January 26th, 2001 in Kutch into an opportunity for a new model for habitation. He then pioneered imaginative development in every hamlet, town and city. This was the true Gujarat model.

In 2014, he took a radical stride which reset the compass of government. He shifted the horizon from poverty alleviation to poverty elimination.

It may surprise most Indians, and possibly shock the poor, to learn that poverty alleviation is a constitutional requirement. If the poor had become sceptical about 'alleviation' they could hardly be blamed. Seven decades after freedom from withering colonial rule, nearly half-a-billion Indians were still waiting for freedom from hunger and deprivation.

Poverty elimination was a quantum leap towards the legitimate demands of the impoverished. Alleviation is a soft obligation. It sets no deadlines and indeed happens of its own volition. Elimination is a promise with parameters. The decisive starting point was a transformative redefinition of poverty. Thus far, poverty had largely been a statistic in an economist's textbook and a word in the politician's speech. Narendra Modi gave poverty a face.

For Modi, poverty was a bitter, degrading human experience. For him, poverty was a mother and a sister searching for a hiding place under open skies for daily ablutions. For him poverty was the choking smoke of 200 cigarettes in a kitchen. For him poverty was the dreadful uncertainty that seizes a mother who does not know where she can find the next meal for her child. For him poverty was the absence of a simple but stable roof. For him poverty was the relentless hunt for an essential, survival necessity like water. For him poverty was a flickering bulb in a village or small town which had electricity but could not produce light. For him poverty was the helplessness of a woman with an idea for income generation but no means to finance it. For him poverty was a vegetable vendor trapped in a loan of ₹10,000. This was the manifesto of his own life which he translated into the agenda of his nation.

If you want to know why Modi won in 2019, do no more than read the full text of his speech from the Red Fort on August 15th, 2014.

It is easy enough to suggest that the reasons for Modi's victory in 2014 were quite different from the reasons which propelled the spectacular triumph of 2019. What he knows is that the elections of 2024 will be as dramatically different from 2019 as 2019 was from 2014.

WINSTON CHURCHILL MADE a pertinent point in 1919, after Britain had won World War I: "[T]he only opposition we have to encounter is the opposition of events". In 2020, Prime Minister Modi was suddenly confronted by the opposition of completely unpredictable, and indeed inexplicable, events.

Covid was so unpredictable that there are still millions, like those refusing to take a vaccine, who do not believe what has happened. This multinational disease has rattled confidence and ravaged the international economy. The economic consequences for India cannot be fully tabulated since the catastrophe has yet to exhaust itself, but it has certainly put a temporary brake on a spread of fresh anti-poverty programmes as resources have had to be transferred to crisis management.

We are still assessing the sheer magnitude of the multi-layered challenge that India faces after the Government has managed to stabilise the dangerous disease through a massive vaccination drive. A report presented by Amit Basole on behalf of the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Aziz Premji University on May 5th this year, titled 'State of Working India 2021: One year of Covid-19', gives us a partial view. It indicates that up to 230 million Indians suffered a deep relapse in their economic condition by

Modi interacts with underprivileged children in Uttar Pradesh, September 17, 2018 this "once in a century crisis"; half of formal salaried employees slipped into the informal sector; and women employees were hurt worse than men. The poor, as always, were hit the hardest. The poorest 25 per cent had borrowed 3.8 times their median income to survive. Given the reality that banks were unlikely to have come to their rescue, we can assume that the interest on these loans is going to be very high.

Modi understood that a pivotal shift had taken place in Indian democracy after three decades of social turmoil provoked by politics. Power in the 21st century would go to those who delivered equitable governance, not those who disguised their ambitions behind false emotionalism

The gargantuan size of the challenge becomes more evident when such bloodless statistics are placed alongside the ageless truth of severe inequality. In September, the All-India Debt and Investment Survey conducted by the National Sample Survey laid bare the facts we know but are reluctant to express: nationwide, the top 10 per cent of Indians own 55.7 per cent of urban and 50.8 per cent of rural assets. These figures were computed from records of land, building, transport vehicles, shares, bank deposits, livestock, and agricultural machinery. The bottom half of the population, or 50 per cent, owns a pitiable 6.2 per cent of urban assets. Delhi is the capital of inequality: 10 per cent owns 80.8 per cent, while 50 per cent has just 2.1 per cent of assets.

Who will pull our nation out of this dangerous morass?

An unpredictable crisis had challenged Modi in 2001 in the form of the Bhuj earthquake, and he created a new Gujarat from the debris. He alone has the ability to rebuild after another unforeseen crisis that has created its own level of devastation.

We know, not least from our national experience, that democracy is fundamentally volatile. It is a concept structured on practical accountability, quantified in the supreme right to reject a government. Even the most partisan observer will surely concede that Narendra Modi is the only leader who can revive India's economy and set it back on the route to high growth and economic justice. He has shown repeatedly the steely capacity to take confident decisions, unaffected by the political storms that are endemic to democratic weather patterns. Even through Covid, the prime minister's signature scheme, to bring drinking water into every home, remains on track, driven by the zeal of a leader with a deadline for his mission.

Modi has the rare ability to keep one part of his mind in objective gear, as arguments wrestle in constant search of resolution in his thought process. He understands that a political party survives on ideology, but ideology withers if it is not nourished by ideas that work. He has always been both the strategist sage and field commander of his forces. Covid interrupted the momentum Modi had generated in the war against poverty, but the pandemic cannot prevent a revival of this momentum as India adjusts to the new normal.

As we rue time lost to the "opposition of events", a 'What-If' postscript seems quite irresistible: Would Narendra Modi have won the General Election of 2009 if he had been the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) candidate for prime minister?

Here is one possible scenario: Modi would have taken BJP over the 200-seat threshold and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition to a majority in 2009 by focusing his campaign on the complete collapse of security, as witnessed in the horrendous terror assault on Mumbai in 2008; rampant corruption; and the promise of economic regeneration, with Gujarat as his evidence. It is obvious that Prime Minister Modi would have been re-elected with an increased majority in 2014. Given his commitment to healthcare of the indigent through government-supported medical insurance, a chain of inexpensive medicine shops and expanding infrastructure, he would without any question have improved India's health services in 10 years. In 2020, India would have tackled a sudden contagion like Covid with even greater effect, maximum care and minimal tragedy. ■

MJ Akbar is an MP and the author of, most recently, Gandhi's Hinduism: The Struggle against Jinnah's Islam

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN

ALL IN ONE

The making of a marketplace with an Indian ethos

THE INDIAN ECONOMY has seen rapid changes, particularly in the last seven years, which are transformational. Time does not give us the luxury of gentle, incremental changes that are less disruptive. Moving India away from debilitating socialism to a free-market economy suffused with Indian ethos is an enormous task. Socialism, aggravated by a licence quota raj, had chained down India's entrepreneurs, withered away her assets and resources and brought in hopelessness.

Although the opening up of our economy commenced in 1991, several necessary follow-up actions were not taken then. This led to a dilution of the impact the 'opening-up' was to have had on the economy. A decade later some efforts began but soon, government changed hands. Unfortunately, what followed that brief period was a lost decade, which set us back so badly that we were classified as one among the five fragile economies.

When government again changed in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with his three unbroken terms as chief minister of Gujarat, committed himself to build a "New India". The demographic dividend provided a market even as the youth were revving to serve as entrepreneurs. Their innovations remained unrecognised even as they were contributing to economies far away from home. Technology and digitalisation could bring in efficiencies. In the New India, every one's basic necessities, such as water, sanitation, accommodation and health will be provided for. New India's policies shall work on empowering people. Even after decades of trying, policies based on principles of entitlement have failed to break the vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment and deprivation.

Old India kept our traditional skills and craftsmen in a glorified cage so that they couldn't access growing markets. In the name of protecting them they were kept in the 'reserved list', thereby restricting access and competition. A disservice to those who conquered world markets before imperialism stifled them! Our farmers, who were producing bountiful crops even as they weathered unpredictable climatic conditions, were bound by restrictions that curtailed their fair earnings. In a diverse country like ours, there were local products, almost one a district. They were left as the underlings. The skills, the artisans, the local products, the dairy and textile cooperatives, all needed revival and rejuvenation. Old India needed to come alive to infuse colour and flavour and to rivet New India to its roots.

Old India was left behind being 'protected' or neglected. An exaggerated belief of socialist India was that government could do nearly everything and deliver too. Steel, cement, watches, telephones, tyres, clothing, pharmaceuticals, condoms, scooters, cars, ships, even bread, were manufactured by government units. Government was also in banking, insurance, refineries, mining, hotels, hospitality, tour operations, airline service and telephone communication. Moving away from this to bring in efficiencies of the private sector was important. Recognising legitimate profit making, respecting industry as job and wealth creators required policy support.

India is seeing a phase of makeover. A clear movement towards an Indian-ethos-infused-market-economy. Not an unbridled mercantilism or a heartless capitalism. The guiding philosophy is a classic: "*Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas, Sab ka Vishwas*" and "*Sab ka Prayaas*".

In Modi 1.0, the floodgates of reforms, rejuvenation and revival opened in full view. The Jan Dhan Yojana, the strengthening of Aadhaar and the using of mobile (the JAM trinity) gave the first mover advantage to the poor. This was soon followed

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code was a major step towards a timebound resolution of insolvencies. The problem of legacy NPAs was addressed. Banks were recapitalised periodically. Now, they are also raising funds in the market

up with Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) in reaching pensions, ration, fuel, Samman Nidhi to those eligible. A big collateral benefit resulting from this exercise was the savings for the taxpayer. All ghost accounts were eliminated and vast sums of money were saved from pilferage. Ujjwala helped achieve so many goals even as it nudged demerit users out of subsidy. The poor couldn't be denied safe and healthy fuel.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) brought the multiplicity of indirect taxes across the country into one. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code was taken up as a major step towards a timebound resolution of insolvencies. Reforming the financial sector commenced with the four R principle: Recognition, Resolution, Recapitalisation and Reform. The problem of legacy Non-Performing Assets (NPA) was addressed steadily so that today nearly all banks are out of Prompt Corrective Action. They were recapitalised periodically. Now, they are also raising funds in the market.

The momentum of economic makeover continues in Modi 2.0 despite the pandemic. In November 2020, Prime Minister Modi, while addressing the Bloomberg New Economic Forum, observed: "[T]he Covid-19 pandemic has posed enormous challenges...The biggest question before the entire

> **Even during the pandemic the amalgamation of banks happened. Today, we have only 12 public sector banks. Budget 2021 saw a policy on public sector enterprises that identified strategic sectors where only a minimum presence of public enterprises will be allowed. All areas are now open to private players**

world is how to restart? The restart will not be possible without a reset. A reset of mindset. A reset of processes. And a reset of practices."

Ensuring no one remains hungry was a priority during the pandemic, resulting in free foodgrain distribution to nearly 80 crore people for eight full months, plus up to three cylinders of cooking gas and a little cash for exigencies that might arise. The Divyang, construction workers and poor senior citizens were provided some relief. Through the four Atmanirbhar Bharat announcements, timely hand-holding support for small and medium enterprises, traders and small employees was also provided.

Equally noteworthy is the flurry of systemic reforms that were undertaken. The lowering of the corporate tax rate was a decision post the first Budget of Modi 2.0. For new companies, the rate was brought to 15 per cent and for existing companies it was brought to 22 per cent. Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) was also exempted for companies. For empowering farmers, three Farm Reforms Acts were passed. Now the farmers can choose the buyer and the price at which they wish to sell their produce.

EVEN DURING THE pandemic the amalgamation of banks happened. Today, we have only 12 public sector banks (PSB) from 27 in 2017. A National Asset Reconstruction Company (NARC) and an India Debt Resolution Company (IDRC) have been established. They shall carve out the NPAs from commercial banks and realise maximum values for the banks. To ensure the value realisation, the Government provides a backstop arrangement. Long-term infrastructure funding with proper risk assessment and long-term capital shall now be available through the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID). An enabling provision in the law also envisages private sector development funding institutions. A pipeline of projects, with a total capital expenditure of over ₹112 lakh crore, has been announced and a portal gives the status of progress.

To attract further investments and make India a manufacturing hub, a Production-Linked Incentive Scheme (PLI) has been introduced to benefit 13 champion sectors. In the light of a global supply chain reset, this scheme has attracted investments in mobile, medical devices, API/KSM manufacture in pharma, food processing, textiles, etcetera.

Long awaited reforms to the telecom and power sectors critical to the economy have also been undertaken.

Budget 2021 saw a policy on public sector enterprises that identified those strategic sectors where only a minimum presence of public enterprises will be allowed. Equally, all areas are now open to private players. An enabling amendment to the General Insurance Act was done. In the insurance sector, 74 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) is allowed through the automatic route. The Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) also goes out for an initial public offering (IPO).

A consent-based framework for account aggregation has been introduced. Bank customers can avail different financial services from a portal where several service providers will be available. Customers can share their data with their chosen service provider. This is a major step in financial inclusion and for access to credit.

Amendments to the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation Act will provide ₹5 lakh insurance cover for small depositors. Moreover, 98.3 per cent of all deposits will get covered through this one step in case of any restrictions on the banks.

Writing recently on the "de Soto effect", Niranjan Rajadhyaksha states: "[The] poor working in tiny informal enterprises are in effect shut out of the formal credit system, and hence condemned to live in poverty, because a lack of clear property rights makes it difficult for them to offer their land assets as collateral to banks." The SVAMITVA scheme envisages mapping of land parcels using drone technology and providing record of rights to village land/house owners. The vicious cycle of poverty due to lack of credit availability is broken through this scheme. Three other schemes—the SVANidhi, MUDRA and Stand-Up India aim at collateral-free lending for small enterprises which are changing the lives of the poor keeping their dignity intact.

This and more is possible because the leadership remains connected to the people and its philosophy of *Sab ka Saath*. ■

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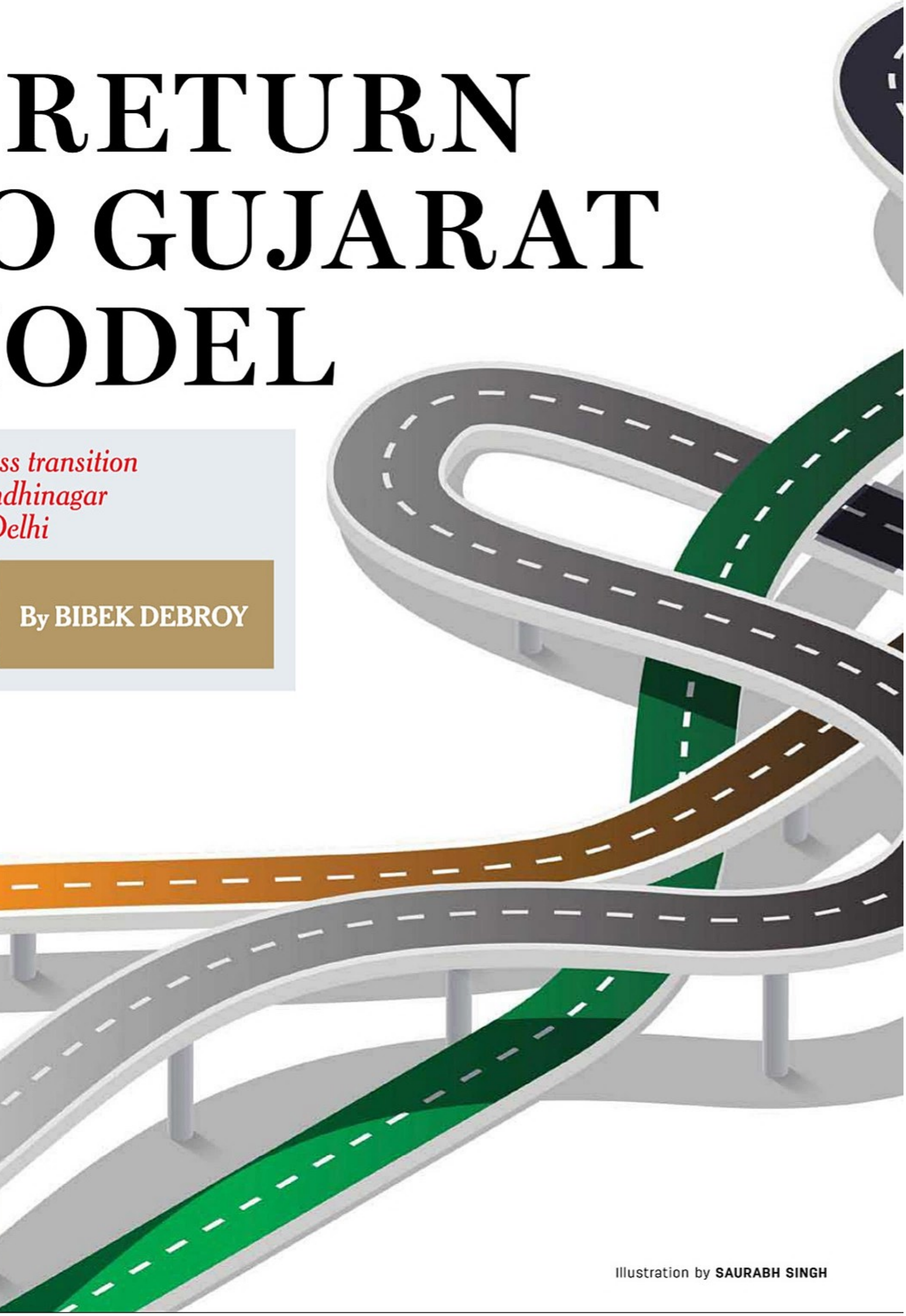
A RETURN TO GUJARAT MODEL

A seamless transition from Gandhinagar to New Delhi

By BIBEK DEBROY



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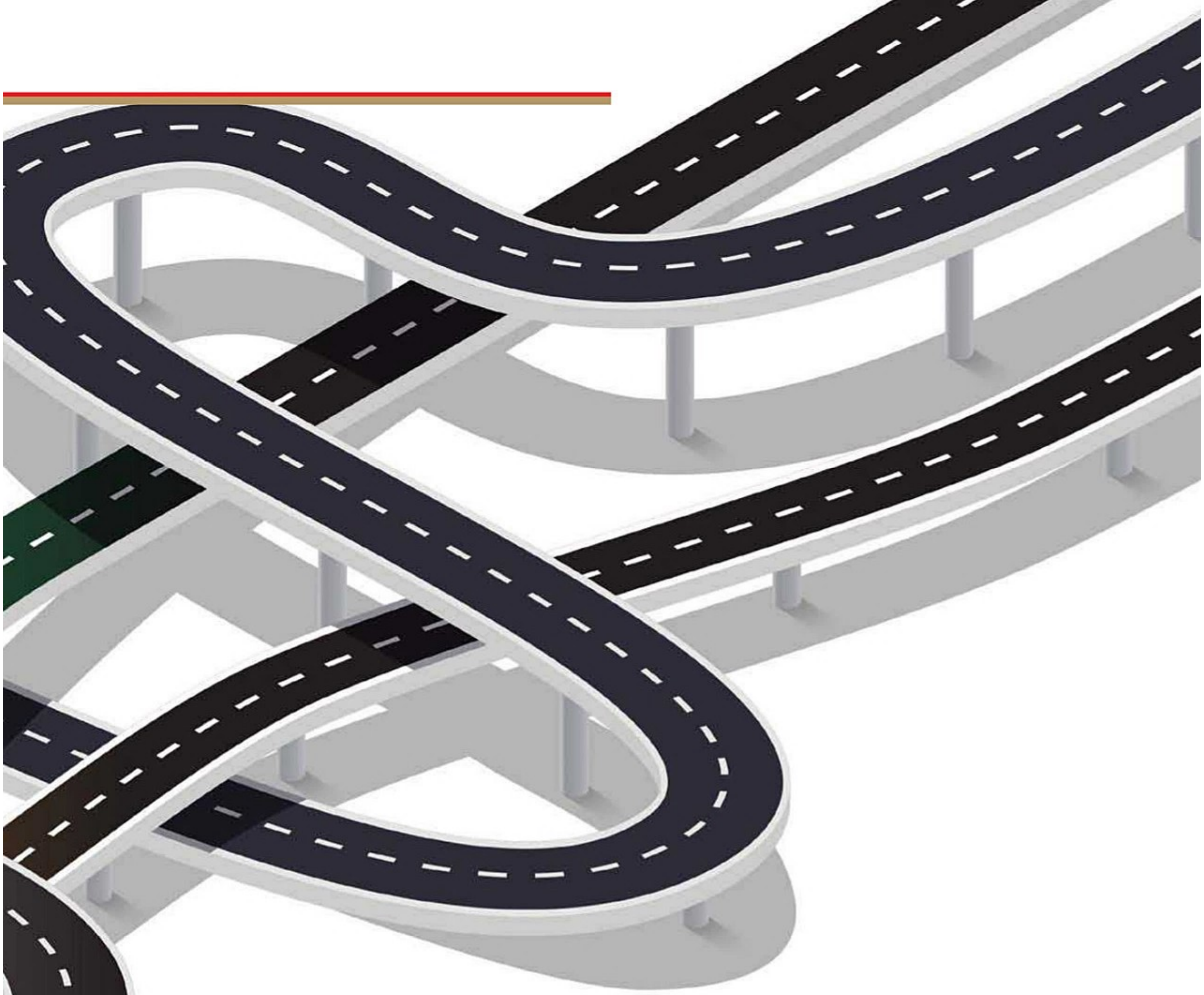

NARENDRA MODI BECAME the chief minister of Gujarat in October 2001 and has been prime minister since May 2014. That's a long span of 20 years, a little over two terms as chief minister and into the second term as prime minister. A prime minister's mandate is different from a chief minister's. The canvas of decision-making is broader. Across those 20 years, several books, academic papers and popular articles have been written on Modinomics, seeking to straitjacket and define his economic philosophy in terms of "isms"—centre, left of centre, right of centre. These reveal less about the individual and are more about the boxes authors prefer.

When he was chief minister, there was a debate about the Gujarat model and about what the development trajectory showed. That's history, and there is no point revisiting it. Shorn of the debate about indicators and measures, which policies bear the stamp of Narendra Modi, the chief minister? My list is the following: one, private investments (Vibrant Gujarat); two, a push to finance, technology and IT (for example, GIFT); three, reform of PSUs in Gujarat (such as Gujarat Electricity Board); four, clamping down on corruption (such as computerisation of land records); five, integrated water distribution, conservation and use through the Sujalam Sufalam scheme (local conservation plus a grid); six, power reforms (Jyotigram Yojana and electricity supply to villages, 24/7 electricity, gas grid, solar power); seven, agriculture (Krishi Mahotsav, BT cotton); eight, women and children (Chiranjeevi Yojana, Beti Bachao, Matru Vandana, Kanya Kelavani Yojana); nine, health (Swastha Gujarat, Chiranjeevi Yojana); ten, skills (Karmayogi Abhiyan for bureaucracy); eleven, school education (the Gunotsav campaign); twelve, deprived sections (Garib Samruddhi Yojana, Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana); and thirteen, governance (e-governance, connecting villages through broadband).

There are a few more, though I have listed the major ones. Broadly, as the then-chief minister himself stated, these are based on five "Shaktis" or "Panchamrita": Jal Shakti (water), Urja Shakti (energy), Jan Shakti (human resources), Gyan Shakti (knowledge) and Raksha Shakti (defence). I suspect many who criticised, and continue to criticise, the Gujarat model, weren't (and still aren't) aware that some of these thirteen existed. Hence, the Gujarat model is criticised for not having had an emphasis on social sectors. (In actual social-sector variables, if one starts with a low base, notwithstanding improvements, it takes a while to offset the low base.) A prime minister's mandate is different from a chief minister's. International relations, foreign policy, defence, cross-border terrorism, Parliament, judiciary, dealing with states, dealing with bureaucracy from a different state—the stage is different. Complexities multiply manifold. I think a prime minister who is elected through Lok Sabha looks at matters differently, as compared to a prime minister who has effectively been nominated (though technically, it may be an election) through Rajya Sabha. I think a prime minister born in independent India looks at matters differently. I think a prime minister who has been a chief minister looks at matters differently.

With the reform of PSUs in Gujarat, it was unreasonable to expect largescale privatisation. Also, anyone familiar with Gujarat should have expected Central initiatives directed towards cleaning up the system

On that last sentence of having been a chief minister earlier, the Union Government accepted the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission in February 2015. Compared to the 13th Finance Commission, the 14th increased devolution to the states by a staggering 10 per cent to 42 per cent. Except once (in the 1980s), recommendations of the Finance Commissions have invariably been accepted. However, given the Union Government's fiscal constraints then, there would have been few objections had the incremental 10 per cent been staggered over time. A prime minister who has not been a chief minister might well have done that. A prime minister who had not been a chief minister might well have continued with a discretion-driven Planning Commission and not replaced it with NITI Aayog, with a different mandate. We tend to forget that templates of several policies, Centrally sponsored schemes, Swachh Bharat, skill development and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), and agriculture, have been determined by sub-groups of chief ministers, not by the Union Government. There has been a strong strand of fiscal devolution and non-fiscal decentralisation of decision-making. Cooperative federalism and competitive federalism (such as through rankings of states) are not contradictory. Nor does decentralisation mean Union-state alone. There needs to be decentralisation within states ,too, and there is heterogeneity and diversity within states. While a prime minister's mandate is different from a chief minister's, I think antecedents of the aspirational districts programme can be found in the Gujarat experience.

Analysts often didn't look at Gujarat hard enough. With the reform of PSUs in Gujarat, not just the Gujarat Electricity Board but also PSUs in sectors like fertilisers and chemicals, it was unreasonable to expect largescale privatisation along the lines of say, Margaret Thatcher. Why should Narendra Modi become another Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, as several pro-right commentators wished him to become? Hence, one shouldn't have expected privatisation to be a binary, all or none. Lest I be misunderstood, as the prime minister has repeatedly stated himself, there is a case for privatisation of Central PSEs (public sector enterprises) that are consistently loss-making (such as Air India, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd or BPCL, Shipping Corporation of India, BEML, Pawan Hans). But, in other cases, there is a scope to monetise and leverage PSE assets (National Monetisation Pipeline), especially since land valuation becomes a difficult issue. Privatisation and competition occur not only through sales of equity of PSEs but also through fresh entry from the private sector (bank, defence, insurance). Why does one disinvest or privatise? There is an efficiency argument and a fiscal argument, though the two can be linked. In both Gandhinagar and New Delhi, the emphasis has been more the former and one should quickly mention fiscal consolidation and rectitude. Contrast what happened in 2009-10 with the reluctance to completely open the fiscal tap in the midst of the Covid pandemic. On a related note, the Modi Government in Delhi doesn't get due credit for keeping inflation in check, compared to rampant inflation in preceding years. Let's not forget that a modern monetary policy framework, with flexible inflation-targeting, was introduced in 2016.

During Modi's first term in Delhi (2014-19), an expression was often used in the media—"from doles to empowerment". A scheme like MGNREGA is demand-driven. A more pertinent question to ask is: Why do we still need something like MGNREGA, so many decades after Independence? Part of the answer has to do with an inability to transform agriculture. The remaining part is about an inability to provide inputs (physical and social infrastructure) required to enable poverty reduction and employment generation. Notwithstanding reforms, some segments will need to be subsidised. There cannot be across-the-board subsidisation. There has to be targeting of beneficiaries. For years, under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), there was preaching about decentralised identification of the poor. That can only be done through a Census, not a survey, the National Sample Survey (NSS) being an example of the second. Therefore, we argued about poverty ratios based on NSS, but little was done to target the poor. The Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC), 2011 is now used for both Union and state government programmes. (With a repeat Census now due, this has been in the news because of the caste part, which became non-implementable in the last Census). That argument, about subsidising only those who warrant subsidies, existed in Gujarat's Chiranjeevi Yojana too. It exists across numerous schemes. The Jan Arogya Yojana, Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, Awas Yojana, household toilets under Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and Ujjwala Yojana are instances. But note a component that was alien to anti-poverty schemes earlier—a contribution by the beneficiary. Doles do not exist without attached strings. In different ways, this exists for Awas Yojana and Ujjwala Yojana, among others.

SBM is a good peg to mention an important and implicit ingredient in Chief Minister and Prime Minister Modi's initiatives, articulated explicitly in the prime minister's recent speech on the occasion of the 75th Independence Day. He spoke not only of "*Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas, Sab ka Vishwas*", but also of "*Sab ka Prayas*". Indeed, India cannot develop and prosper only because of what government, more so the Union Government, does. There has to be a citizen initiative. It exists in SBM, voluntary giving up of LPG subsidies, Smart Cities Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission. Indeed, I would also list MyGov and *Mann Ki Baat* under that head.

IN THE CONTEXT OF Gujarat, I mentioned the emphasis on IT, e-governance and clamping down on corruption. The Jan Dhan Yojana is a remarkable instance of the success in opening bank accounts. This is, of course, an extension of the argument of providing inputs (in this instance, financial products) to everyone. The success of Jan Dhan has been vetted externally. One shouldn't forget to mention dashboards (which use IT) and exist for every Union Government scheme. There is no need to reiterate obvious points about the JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) trinity. Suffice to say, it has reduced leakage and corruption, eliminating intermediaries. On a broader anti-corruption plank, few would have expected demonetisation, or at least, the precise day on which it was announced. However, anyone familiar with Gujarat should have expected initiatives directed towards cleaning up the system—the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 or RERA, clamping down on shell companies, the amended Benami Transactions (Prohibition) Amendment Act, eliminating interviews for lower-level government appointments, transparency in coal allocations, broadening of tax bases (both direct and GST) to curb evasion, Government e-Market Place (GeM) and even National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) and urea policy. The last two may not be specifically directed at corruption, but they do reduce intermediaries. While on taxation, one should mention the Vivad Se Vishwas scheme, faceless assessment and the use of IT to reduce the human interface.

India cannot develop and prosper only because of what government does. There has to be a citizen initiative. It exists in Swachh Bharat, voluntary giving up of LPG subsidies, Smart Cities Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission

As a polity, we have a tension. While governance needs to be decentralised (not just from the Union Government to states but also within states), it is one country. Therefore, part of the template must be standardised and uniform, notwithstanding the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution. Hence, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) is not only a more efficient system of indirect taxation—though it is still a work-in-progress, it has dramatically reduced inter-state barriers that occur because of taxation. Notice the tension within the GST framework itself. The GST Council is a phenomenal instance of Union-state cooperation in decision-making. Simultaneously, states are reluctant to cede control and standardise rates, including all products in GST. Productivity occurs because of more efficient land, labour and capital markets (with capital understood in an economist's sense). For efficient capital markets, one should recognise the importance of the new legislation on insolvency and bankruptcy. Given that labour is in the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule, Union Government labour laws have been consolidated under four statutes, but the rest has to be entirely left to states. Given that land is entirely in the State List, everything has to be left to states. I think, in Narendra Modi's mind, there exists an image of a unified India, with unification transcending narrow economic definitions. Thus, for the future, one country-one election. For the present, not only better physical infrastructure (roads, railways, civil aviation, airports, railway stations, Bharatmala, Sagarmala) generally, but also directed towards parts of India historically deprived (think of the Northeast). That unified and integrated India also means a safe and secure India. Hence, defence, internal and external security. Ask yourself, how many major terrorist incidents have there been in India since 2014, cross-border or otherwise? This is a question we rarely think about. What occurs is visible, what has been prevented remains invisible.

A column with limited word length doesn't allow one to document everything Narendra Modi has done, or has sought to do, in two-plus terms in Gujarat and one-plus term in Delhi so far. I think a pattern and continuity exist in the transition from chief minister to prime minister and I have simply cited some instances. He had an image for India in 2022, when we complete 75 years of independence. The Covid pandemic has knocked everything back by at least two years, including the $5 trillion aspirational GDP target. Perhaps the target is now 2024. (At least, the Jal Jeevan Mission has that timeline.) In any event, 30 years down the line, when posterity examines the Narendra Modi imprint on governance and public policy in India, I think the assessment will be that these 20 years have been transformational. ■

Bibek Debroy is Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

END OF ENTIT

The difference when intermediaries are evicted

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

LEMENT

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

WHEN PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi launched the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi or PM-Kisan on February 24th, 2019 in Gorakhpur, there was plenty of cynical commentary. The General Election was at hand and the scheme was supposed to be a measure to bolster the Government's allegedly poor standing among the electorate. The scheme was announced by then Finance Minister Piyush Goyal on February 1st and he had made a provision of ₹75,000 crore in the Union Budget for the scheme.

The cynicism came in two varieties: some held it to be an electoral ploy while others thought it was a case of too little, too late. More than two years later, data shows the Government was on the right track, after all. Earlier this month, the Central Statistical Office (CSO) released the Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households, a report that presents a snapshot of the status of farmers for the July 2018 to June 2019 period, a period roughly eight months prior to the launch of PM-Kisan. The survey shows that an average farmer earns a paltry ₹27 per day from the cultivation of crops. This translates to ₹9,855 per year, assuming the farmer works every day of the year. With every farming family getting ₹6,000 per year under PM-Kisan, the support provided by the scheme amounts to 60 per cent of what a farmer earns from cultivation.

A major change in the 'new welfarism' under Modi is that instead of the 'entitlements' approach earlier which came close to fiscal recklessness and tried to turn everything into a 'right', the poor are ensured basic goods and services

The comparison is not wholly accurate as PM-Kisan delivers support to a farming family and not an individual farmer, but however one may look at the data, it is clear that the scheme goes a long way in helping small and marginal farmers who are buffeted by adverse economic circumstances. There is little doubt that while our farmers deserve more, the question is about getting the resources for the task.

A year later after the scheme was launched India experienced its worst economic downturn due to an external shock, a pandemic. The emergency measures put in place badly hit Government revenues. But that did not affect PM-Kisan: enrolment in the scheme as well as payouts continued apace. Envisaged as a scheme to help 12 crore small and marginal farmers, the scheme witnessed 3.16 crore payouts from December 2018 to March 2019. Two years later, this number jumped to 10.23 crore during the same period and has remained stable around 10.5 to 11 crore payments every quarter, largely fulfilling its objectives.

The enthusiastic participation of farmers in the scheme clearly points to the massive demand for financial help among farmers, something that cannot be met completely by the Government's redistributive efforts. The prime minister clearly recognised this and began working towards doubling farmers' income in five years. Unfortunately, that goal was dented by a class of large famers who launched an agitation against farm reform laws that would have allowed greater market access to the sons of the soil. This unfortunate aspect of India's politics has, however, not deterred the Government from furthering the welfare of the backbone of India's population, its farmers.

The political roadblocks on the path of reforms that directly help people are best exemplified by the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programme that lies at the heart of the welfare delivery plumbing of the Government. At any given point, the Union and state governments run hundreds of welfare schemes. The sum of government money involved in these schemes is, to put it mildly, gigantic. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREG) scheme alone is upwards of ₹65,000 crore every year. These schemes, until seven or eight years ago, were also the largest sources of corruption in India. Every year in the Budget, the Union finance minister would announce a slew of schemes meant for poor citizens. Only a fraction of these resources ever reached those for whom the money was meant. From 2014, one of the priorities of the Government was to devise a system in which this loot could be limited to as great an extent as possible.

The architecture of the system depended on the use of Aadhaar numbers to link individuals. From ration shops dispensing foodgrain to subsidies for LPG cylinders to more, the linking of Aadhaar with individual accounts was essential if corruption was to be halted. This met with a wall of political and intellectual resistance. It was argued that Aadhaar did not have legal backing in the form of a law. When that was done on March 11th, 2016, when the Bill enabling this was passed in Lok Sabha, a legal challenge was mounted in the Supreme Court on various grounds, such as a violation of privacy, procedural infirmities in passing the law, etcetera.

Finally, after the Supreme Court cleared the decks, the DBT programme took off. At the end of May 2016, 74 schemes of 17 ministries and/or departments were covered by DBT. This later rose to 311 schemes from 54 ministries. Today, it is inconceivable that any Government benefit can be transferred bypassing the DBT mode.

The architecture's finest moment came during the pandemic. In one the most painful events of modern Indian history, lakhs of workers began trekking back to their villages as urban India locked down and economic activities ground to a halt. A key concern, in the Government as well as among citizens, was to ensure that hardship was minimised. In April alone, just a month after the nationwide lockdown was announced, more than ₹36,659 crore from Central and state government schemes was transferred by DBT to the accounts of 16.01 crore people. Cash benefits amounting to ₹9,930 crore were transferred to 19.86 crore women account holders. This was part of the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana.

A year later, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the system allowed the Government to reach people during a critical time. During an event in Aurangabad on September 16th, she said: "The JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) trinity concept of the Narendra Modi Government helped to reach the farthest person in the country. There were questions in the minds of people when the Jan Dhan scheme was launched…The inclusion of people in Jan Dhan stood by us in the Covid-19 pandemic, and we could help the people directly so that they can live their lives."

What is interesting about the "new welfarism" under the Modi Government is its changed emphasis from previous approaches. Some of the earlier schemes, such as MGNREGA, continue as before. The problem with those efforts was that they could neither deliver a sufficient level of income that rural households could get the goods and services they needed nor could they provide the "basic goods" themselves as at relatively low levels of income, it

Free ration being distributed under PM Garib Kalyan Yojana in Ghaziabad on August 5

प्रधानमंत्री
गरीब कल्याण
अन्न योजना

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is very difficult, if not impossible, to get hold of these goods and services. Consider potable water through piped connections. In an urban setting where infrastructure, such as water purification plants, treatment units, pipelines and water quality systems are in place, the "last tap" delivery is not difficult. But in India's far-flung rural areas, where such infrastructure existed only on paper, it is impossible to provide this service.

In August 2019, Modi had promised that every rural household in India would have access to tapped water supply. At that time, fulfilling the gargantuan task appeared difficult in the span of five years. Financial resources were one matter, the sheer physical spread of the country across vastly different terrains posed another problem. Two years later, the Jal Jeevan Mission—the umbrella programme tasked with providing Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC) to every home—has gathered pace. The Covid-19 pandemic did slow the progress a bit, but even with that hiccup, 78 districts now have 100 per cent FHTC coverage. More than 1.14 lakh villages have tap connections with states like Bihar, Odisha, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh taking great strides in providing tapped water connections. This year, Sitharaman provided a whopping ₹50,000 crore in the 2021-22 Budget for the Jal Jeevan Mission. This is likely to speed up the programme considerably.

The real—political—reason why the JAM architecture that empowered the poor was never put in place was its very nature: if the poor were empowered, then a very powerful set of intermediaries would be disempowered. This was one of the key reforms of the first Modi Government

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF these "basic goods" is an LPG connection. Once again, in urban India with its better connectivity and transport, getting a gas cylinder is just a matter of a phone call to the distributor or a centralised service. But clean cooking fuel has remained a pipedream in rural India. In its absence, respiratory tract diseases had become a constant in villages where unclean fuels were the only option for virtually all households.

The PM Ujjwala Yojana aimed to change this and push LPG connections to rural India. Launched by Modi on May 1st, 2016 in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, the scheme originally had a target of five crore households. Later, it was extended to eight crore households with the last household being given a connection by the prime minister in Aurangabad on September 7th, 2019, well ahead of its target date. The scheme was extended to another one crore households in the Budget for 2021-22 as there were many deprived households that did not have this benefit. It was launched earlier this year. With the first phase of the scheme, LPG connections to poor families in India have gone up considerably since the scheme was launched in 2016. All 715 districts of the country are covered under the scheme.

At a conceptual and political level, the "new welfarism" under Modi provides an interesting contrast to the previous avatars of social welfare. Either by design or by intent programmes were allowed to coexist with corrupt practices, especially in rural India. The lack of information, the passing of benefits through the local power structure where elected officials often had a say in distributing benefits and poor citizens having to interface with officials often meant that benefits never really reached where they were meant to go. There were two issues. One, the number of intermediaries needed to be reduced; and two, citizens themselves needed to be empowered and take charge of their resources.

The way out was envisioned a long time ago when Aadhaar was devised as a universal identity number and was meant especially for those who lacked documentation to prove their identity. There was a clear link between the availability of a unique identification and the elimination of 'ghosts' from the welfare system across schemes and programmes. But this was not done. At the intellectual level, the justification for opposing the marriage of Aadhaar and welfare was violation of privacy. This was a far-fetched concern if not downright cruel: viewed dispassionately, the intellectual opponents of the new system seemed to want the poor to choose privacy over welfare.

This, however, was just the surface. The real—political—reason why the JAM architecture that empowered the poor was never put in place was its very nature: if the poor were empowered, then a very powerful set of people, a thick parasitical layer of intermediaries vital to the political system then, would be disempowered. This was one of the key reforms of the first Modi Government.

When one looks back at what was done, it seems to be simple enough but its welfare and political implications are still unfolding. This has certainly been for the better of India's poor citizens.

The second major change is in the way welfare has been visualised. The so-called 'entitlements' approach earlier came close to fiscal recklessness and tried to turn everything into a 'right'. In a vast country like India with a relatively low tax-to-GDP ratio, this was a recipe for constant fiscal pressure. Instead, a much better option was to visualise a bouquet of 'basic goods' that could improve the quality of life at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

This combination has proved its worth. Millions of households have accessed goods and services that they never imagined could come their way. The manner of frictionless and faceless delivery—also seamless in the case of benefits transferred via the DBT mechanism—is empowering in itself for the poor. ■

DHARMENDRA PRADHAN

GOOD EDUCATION

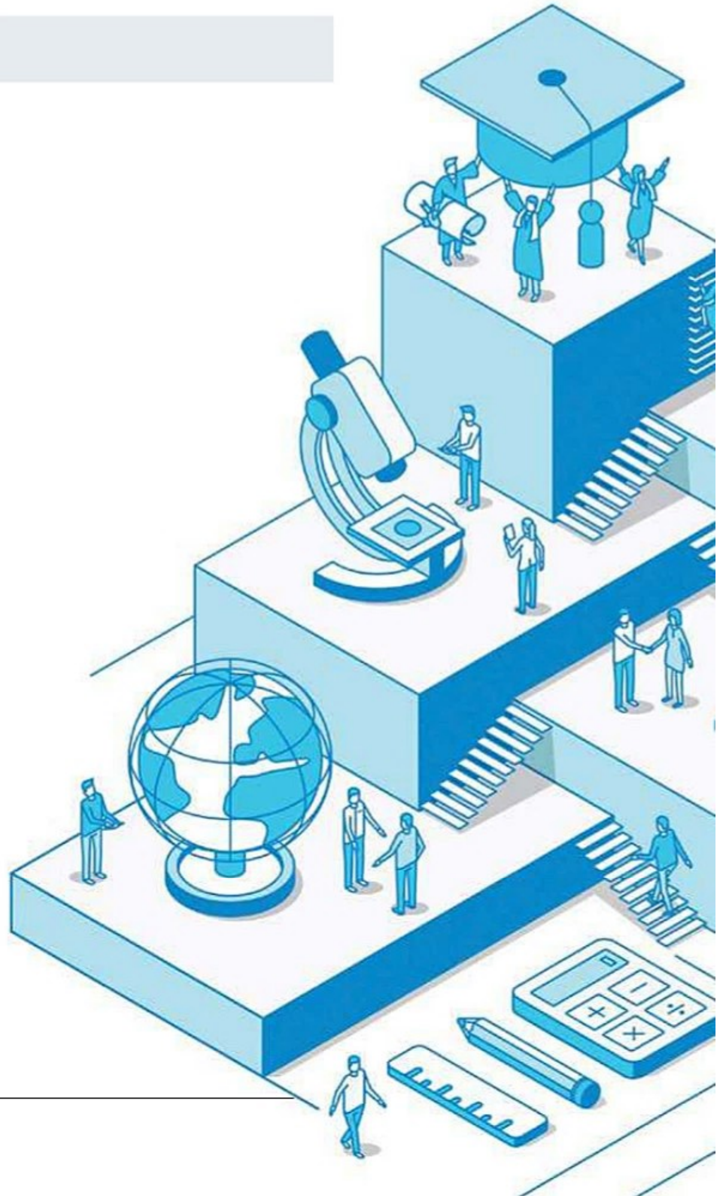
Setting the foundation of the twenty-first century

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION Policy (NEP) 2020 from the Union Government is an investment in the future of education. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision is to make our students future-ready and to make India an international hub of knowledge. For this purpose, the Government is committed to using technology and innovation to enhance greater inclusion in the education sector. In the process, we will combine education with skill development, with the aim of making our future generations job-ready as soon as they finish their studies.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, our Government is devoted to offering a seamless link between education, knowledge and, eventually, job creation. In fact, NEP has two mantras: first, to teach children not only to learn but also how to learn; second, it is based on the principle that one size does not fit all. Therefore, the goal is to get the best out of each student for nation-building. This is an ideal that is in tandem with the requirements of various job functions in the decades to come.

The prime minister wants to tap into the full potential of our demographic dividend as we head towards a tomorrow fuelled by Industrial Revolution 4.0 where cutting-edge skill development initiatives along with holistic education will ensure that our youth are fully equipped to benefit from the opportunities arising in a technology-led world and be at the forefront when it comes to innovation and entrepreneurship.

Indications of this trend are there for all to see. We have myriad work opportunities in India now owing to various programmes of the Government, and in collaboration with industry. Unsurprisingly, the greatest beneficiaries of this governmental push are Indian startups across sectors. I can aver that the prime minister's vision has come to fruition earlier than expected with India making huge improvements in ease of doing business and in the large number of job opportunities being created across industrial segments and in the startup



space. Triggering growth in manufacturing to education technology, to food tech and travel tech, to mobility and anything entrepreneurial, is the medley of education and skilling, which has emerged as a key gamechanger.

It's been only one year since the launch of NEP, but we have already rolled out many initiatives in sync with it. The Academic Bank of Credit (ABC), envisaged as a digital bank that holds the credits earned by a student in any course, is one of the major innovations in the education space. It is a major instrument for facilitating multidisciplinary and holistic education as well as multiple entry and exit in higher education. Promotion of technical courses in regional languages is also expected to boost inclusivity. Special training programmes for teachers on subjects such as problem solving and critical thinking are expected in turn to create a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs. NEP also looks to target differently abled students by focusing on sign language. The idea, therefore, is to leave nobody out. The Government is also creating a national digital education infrastructure (N-DEAR) to enable remote learning and to make education more accessible.

> **NEP is based on accessibility, affordability, equity and quality. It does not make rigid distinctions between arts and sciences. This multi-disciplinary approach is expected to prepare the next generation of leaders and innovators**

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

In line with the prime minister's emphasis on the need for skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling, we have set an ambitious target even at the school level: By 2025, at least 50 per cent of learners through the school and higher education system shall have exposure to vocational education. We are working to make our schools and higher education institutions (HEIs), centres of skilling too. In the hub and spoke model, schools and Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) will work together to create an integrated ecosystem of skilling and education.

I would like to emphasise here that India has already made remarkable progress over the past six years in the field of research and patents. While the number of research publications released from India in 2014-15 was 1,33,335, it rose to 1,87,014 in 2018. Similarly, the number of patents from India rose from 6,153 in 2014 to 23,578 in 2019.

However, we aren't going to rest on past laurels. Our goal is to become a global leader in education and skilling. We have set up the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) to provide financial assistance for creation of educational infrastructure and R&D in India's premier educational institutions. To promote the culture of research, we are setting up the National Research Foundation (NRF) and have set aside ₹50,000 crore for the next five years. We have announced 1,000 fellowships for students from ASEAN countries. As a nation that believes in the principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, we will offer incentives to foreign students to choose India as their education destination. We are equally determined to encourage and support women to pursue their higher education. To raise the participation of women in technical education, the Modi Government has made a provision of 20 per cent additional seats for women in the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). In the 2018 fiscal year, the enrolment of women at IITs was only 8 per cent compared with more than 19 per cent in 2020. The number of women PhDs has also increased from 3,283 in 2015-16 to 4,597 in 2019-20.

The emphasis that the prime minister has given to NEP 2020, an education policy that has come in more than three decades, is to make learning meet the requirements of the 21st century. This policy is based on the principles of accessibility, affordability, equity and quality. It also lays much thrust on flexibility by not making any rigid distinctions between the arts and sciences streams, the idea being elimination of deleterious hierarchies in learning. This multi-disciplinary approach that values both academic and extracurricular achievements of students is expected to prepare the next generation of leaders and innovators who will excel in diverse fields.

As Prime Minister Modi has said, NEP 2020 is not the Government's education policy but the country's education policy and will lay the foundation of the New India, the 21st century India. As we forge ahead, we need to work together to make NEP an instrument to create a generation of future-ready youth who will work in diverse fields to take our country to greater heights. ■

Dharmendra Pradhan is Union Minister of Education, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship

DELIVERA

The evolution of a digital evangelist

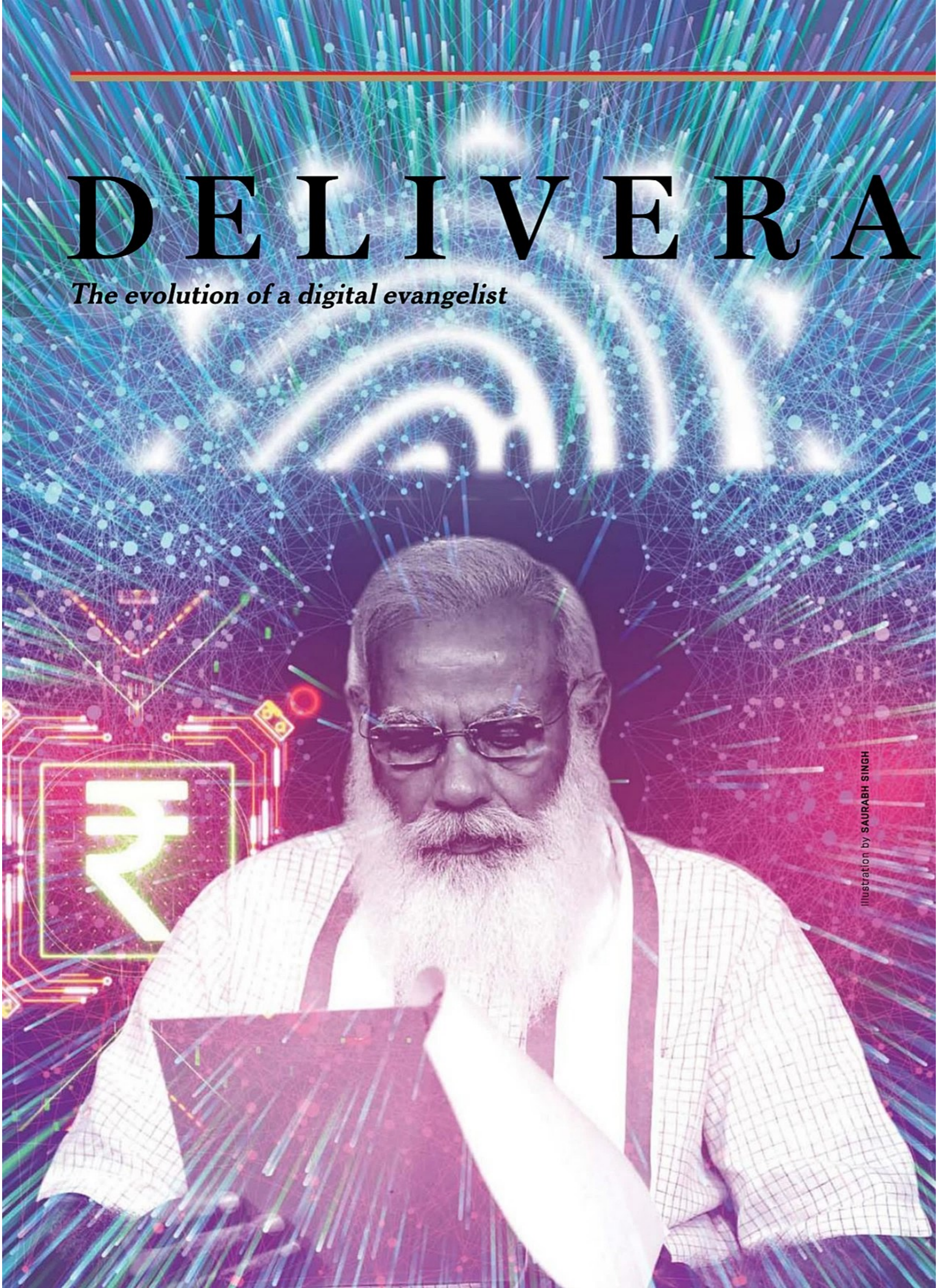


Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

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By ANIL PADMANABHAN

IN SEPTEMBER, INDIA launched its most ambitious plan to economically empower individuals and small enterprises by leveraging their personal data. The Account Aggregator (AA) framework enabling this monetisation of personal data was launched at a virtual event hosted by iSPIRT, a group of technology evangelists based out of Bengaluru who helped create the India Stack architecture powering UPI or the Unified Payments Interface—something that has created a world-class digital payments system. The first batch of the eight authorised entities include the State Bank of India, IDFC Bank and ICICI Bank.

The AA framework enables consent-based monetisation of data, particularly of individuals and small enterprises. Once Parliament signs off on the pending data privacy law, all elements of the strategy to accelerate inclusion will be in place.

This exchange of verified individual data will not only spur another round of financial inclusion—with more individuals and small enterprises empowered by their personal data to access credit—and the ongoing FinTech revolution in India, but it could also stoke a fresh boom in consumption, something India so desperately needs in a post-Covid world.

Indeed, it is yet another step redefining inclusion within the guardrails of empowerment as opposed to the previously accepted principle of entitlement. Together, they are poised to effect an unprecedented makeover of the Indian financial architecture, especially in using data to redefine risk.

Consequently, it will disrupt decades-old lending practices and replace them with a new architecture—in which collateral is not the only metric—whereby entities will take credit to those who need it on a real-time basis. And it proposes to do this by monetising an individual's or company's data. Hitherto this value was either unrealised or the data was being harvested for free by various online platforms. Something that Nandan Nilekani, the former head of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and a key backer of AA, often sums up so succinctly: Indians are economically poor but data-rich.

The launch of AA is yet another move to bridge these two extremes. This time, through data empowerment.

If there is one thing which is central to the new paradigm of inclusion, it is Aadhaar—the 12-digit unique identity number issued to every resident of India by UIDAI. Aadhaar or the biometric digital identity enables the creation of a digital infrastructure, which in turn allows people to access any service from anywhere in the country. It is part of the technology stack driving UPI (enabling transfer of money to anyone using a mobile phone), One Nation, One Ration Card, and most recently, the One Nation, One Jab project.

While Aadhaar's popular history is associated with the period after 2009 when Nilekani, co-founder of Infosys, was appointed to roll out the ambitious identity project, the fact is that it has far more modest origins. It was first proposed by Arvind Virmani, economist and long-serving technocrat in the Union

The enabling Account Aggregator framework comes at a time when FinTech companies have already begun to focus on metrics other than collateral. The new set of psychographics being deployed include the mapping of cash flows or GST receipts accruing to an MSME

Government, during his stint with the Planning Commission.

The idea appealed to the then Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance under the stewardship of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Consequently, Virmani was appointed as head of a working group of the 11th Plan. The report titled "Entitlement Reform for Empowering the Poor: The Integrated Smart Card System" argued that the new regime should be based on the idea of a Unique Identification Number: "The concept of a unique national level citizens' identity number developed from these initiatives as well as aspirations for a pan-India e-governance system. This unique ID could form the fulcrum around which all other smart card applications and e-governance initiatives would revolve."

In 2009, the Planning Commission under the then Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) issued the notification to create UIDAI—a big blunder as subsequent events showed.

However, the project ran into problems almost immediately. From within UPA, there was a strong resistance to the idea; and making matters worse, a former judge of the Karnataka High Court, K Puttaswamy, filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court seeking to nix the project, claiming it violated an individual's privacy and that UIDAI did not have statutory backing to collect this data. Frankly, the former judge had a point: UIDAI is the repository of key personal information of individuals and, therefore, at a big risk to breach of privacy.

The project almost ran aground though a determined lot of technocrats managed to reveal the potential of Aadhaar by using it to transfer cooking gas subsidy directly to the consumer by linking their Aadhaar and the bank account. However, with the legal cloud over it, the Aadhaar project was mostly in limbo even though a large segment of the population had already been issued an ID.

One of the most high-profile applications of the India Stack has been the creation of UPI, the digital architecture allowing for inter-operable payments on a real-time basis. It had the potential to change the game for consumers and small businesses

By then, NDA-II under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi had taken charge. Almost immediately they saw the immense potential that Aadhaar offered, which went beyond the initial mandate of delivering government programmes. But for that, it had to first extricate the project from the legal tangles, especially since an interim order by the Supreme Court effectively hamstrung Aadhaar by ruling that it was not mandatory for access to key government programmes, even as it referred the issue of privacy to a five-judge Constitution bench.

Accordingly, NDA first filed an appeal against the interim order and initiated the process to provide statutory backing to UIDAI. Parliament passed the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Bill in 2016, ringfencing UIDAI from the charge of illegally collecting personal data. And then the Government committed to enacting a privacy law. The strategy worked and the legal challenge faded, clearing the decks for tapping Aadhaar's potential—especially with respect to inclusion.

AMONG THE FIRST projects to deploy Aadhaar was the direct benefit transfer or DBT on a large scale and a real-time basis. And this rested on the foundation of the JAM trinity—Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile. Effectively, it provided an economic GPS for the Government to identify a beneficiary.

Yes, the JAM idea was seeded under UPA but remained stillborn due to a lack of support within the Government and the legal challenges posed by various interest groups. The real story of the weaponisation of Aadhaar commenced only after 2016.

The implementation of DBT using JAM was kicked off with respect to cooking gas or LPG. In the very first year, 2014-15, PAHAL (Pratyaksh Hanstantrit Labh) or direct benefit transfer of LPG (DBTL) had identified 151 million beneficiaries and transferred ₹29,000 crore—little over a third of the normal disbursements–directly to their bank accounts.

Prior to this, consumers purchased LPG at a subsidised price, while commercial establishments had to pay market rates. This led to the creation of a dual market and leakage of subsidies by the creation of ghost accounts. Under PAHAL, a consumer was identified on the basis of JAM—eliminating ghost accounts—and paid the market price; the subsidy was transferred directly to their bank account in three days. It was a case of killing two birds with one stone: not only did the beneficiary not lose the subsidy, but one price nixed the black market for LPG.

Alongside, the Government soon discovered that the bulk of the universally distributed subsidy accrued to the affluent. Its internal assessment revealed that 97 per cent of LPG was consumed by the richest 30 per cent households. This set the stage for weeding out the rich consumers and restricting the subsidy to the poor—a powerful message in empowerment.

Simultaneously, the Government launched a similar exercise with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), the largest safety net programme for rural India which guarantees employment on demand. The annual spend in 2020-21—also the year which was devastated by Covid-19 originating in Wuhan, China—topped a staggering ₹1 trillion.

With the beneficiaries clearly identified, the use of JAM to

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Solar lamps being packed at a small business funded by Aajeevika, a government loan programme available to women, in Chiraili village in Bihar, January 8, 2019

make payments under MGNREGA returned substantial savings to the exchequer—according to the finance ministry, the new system reduced leakages by 14 per cent and fund disbursal by 38 per cent, even while showing no reduction in the amount of work done under the programme. And since the payments were now being made in real time by the Government, it reduced the share of float money by a fourth. The reduction in idle funds, which entail an interest cost as the Union Government borrows the money, saved key resources to the Central exchequer.

Enthused by the initial success, NDA went into an overdrive on DBT. According to the Government, in 2019-20, DBT was used for 426 schemes entailing a transfer of ₹3.81 trillion in benefits. Significantly, the savings on leakages at the end of March 2020 was ₹1.7 trillion—sufficient to fund the first Covid-19 relief package announced last year, and clearly demonstrating the opportunity cost of corruption.

A collateral gain was the creation of bank accounts for a population that was largely unbanked. In just six years, the number of no-frills Jan Dhan accounts grew from 12.5 crore on January 31st, 2015 to 42.25 crore on April 14th this year. By including an additional 300 million people in the formal banking system so quickly, India once again demonstrated its ability to efficiently implement projects of scale.

The headstart provided by Aadhaar is unlocking immense opportunities for India to leapfrog in its efforts to beat underdevelopment. Among them, the most standout innovation is the creation of the India Stack by iSPIRT.

It is a set of Application Programming Interface (API)—the bridge that allows two software applications to engage with each other—which permits businesses, government or any developer to tap into the digital infrastructure built on the foundation of Aadhaar.

The India Stack enabled this path-breaking innovation by leveraging four pillars: Presence-less (digital access and verification-using Aadhaar); Paper-less (digital records allowing portability); Cash-less (one interface allowing for inter-operable payments between bank accounts and wallets); Consent (allows entities to access an individual's data).

One of the most high-profile applications of the India Stack has been the creation of UPI, the digital architecture allowing for inter-operable payments on a real-time basis. It had the potential to change the game for consumers and small businesses, especially since most of them do not possess the temperament to operate a bank account even though they are very comfortable working social media applications.

In the old system, a person making an online payment would have to login to give the go-ahead to the custodian of their money. What UPI did was to unbundle this process and allowed for consent to be vested with third-party operators like PayTM, PhonePe and so on. In turn, these intermediaries were able to enable this process allowing for phenomenal ease of use on a real-time basis, providing an unprecedented fillip to online financial transactions.

Initially, the response to UPI was tepid. However, the situation transformed dramatically after the boost to the digital economy through the implementation of demonetisation of high-value currencies in 2016. According to RBI, the monthly volume of transactions using UPI has grown exponentially in the last three years. It was 189.3 million in May 2018, 733.4 million in the same month in 2019, before surging to a staggering 2.54 trillion in May this year. Though designed for e-commerce, the scope of UPI has widened dramatically in the business of payments.

GOING BY THE success of UPI, the innovations using India Stack are now poised to log a new benchmark in inclusion. The launch of the AA framework is looking to productionise the audacious idea of monetising personal data to generate credit lines, the obverse of the current practice of collateral-based lending.

Among the first uses for AA will be in creating first-time credit opportunities for demographic segments like micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Despite contributing to about a third of the country's national income, employing a quarter of the country's 400 million-plus workforce and possessing an impressive appetite for risk, their access to formal credit lines are limited.

It is estimated that at present only about 8 per cent of MSMEs get access to formal credit. This is largely because of the informal nature of their economic status, which limits their ability to generate the metrics to be eligible for conventional loans from banks.

This is what the AA framework is poised to change. The enabling AA framework comes about at a time when FinTech companies have already begun to disrupt the business of lending by focusing on metrics other than collateral. The new set of psychographics being deployed by these FinTech companies to map a borrower include the mapping of cash flows or Goods and Services Tax receipts accruing to an MSME.

In just six years, the number of no-frills Jan Dhan accounts grew from 12.5 crore on January 31st, 2015 to 42.25 crore on April 14th this year. By including an additional 300 million people in the formal banking system so quickly, India once again demonstrated its ability to efficiently implement projects of scale

Beneficiaries queue up to receive money under the Jan Dhan Yojana in Nagaon district of Assam, April 6, 2020

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This transaction will be consent-based and the AA is data-blind—neither can these entities view the data passing through them, nor can they store it. And companies who wish to use this data for commercial use will have to pay for it—the tariff for which will vary depending on the frequency of use.

First-time collateral-free business loans and flexi working capital to fund seasonal business—largely small sachet loans—to MSMEs will create a formal credit history for this new class of borrowers of formal credit. This alone will partially de-risk them in the eyes of more conventional lenders. Analysts estimate the business potential of such small-sachet, flow-based loans to grow to ₹25 trillion in the next three years.

This kind of credit empowerment, which can also be extended to individuals, can only translate into more business activity. A win-win for all.

An equally compelling use of the AA framework could be how the over 100 million beneficiaries of the ₹1 trillion-plus rural employment guarantee scheme can use their data capturing wage receipts from the Government to avail of the loans. At the moment, this is not possible since borrowing is presaged on collateral and data on cash flows is not shared.

The exceptional nature of the India Stack innovation is that it can be replicated across sectors. Yes, while so far its success has been so well demonstrated in FinTech applications, work has begun to expand its use in strengthening India's health fabric.

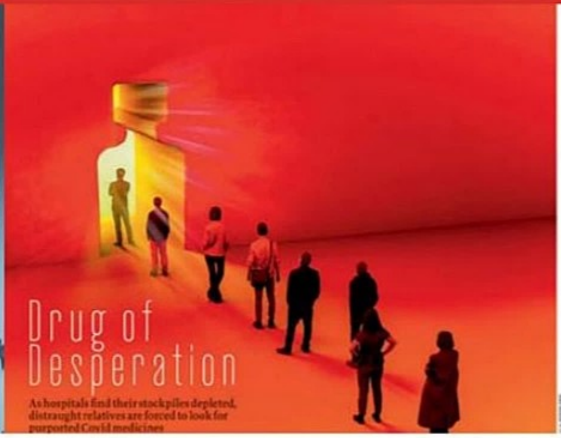
The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic is forcing the Government to advance the rollout of the National Digital Health Mission. It will exploit the existing digital highway to connect the various stakeholders in the healthcare ecosystem. The pilot project launched in the Union territories of Chandigarh, Ladakh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Puducherry, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and Lakshadweep last year has yielded sufficient evidence for the Centre to now roll this out nationally. On September 27th, the prime minister formally launched the programme nationally. Going forward, all stakeholders in the health system will now be on the same platform.

Essentially, what is envisaged is the creation of a national health grid ensuring people's access to healthcare in a holistic manner. A patient can use their digital footprint to tap tele-consultancy, digital delivery of medicines, access to labs and health professionals anywhere in the country. Together with Ayushman Bharat, the health insurance package for the 600 million people at the bottom of the pyramid, the portability of health records will add to the inclusion stack.

It is then clear that an indigenously developed technology backbone, yet world-class product, has made it possible for India to redefine and accelerate inclusion. And most importantly, it is achieving this by weighing in favour of empowerment without abandoning the existing principle of entitlement. Not only will this enable trading up for these demographic segments, it will also secure the social fabric of India. ■

Anil Padmanabhan is a Delhi-based journalist and tweets @capitalcalculus

COVID RETROSPECTIVE
OPEN
SURVIVING THE VIRUS (STILL)
INSIDE MODI'S PANDEMIC LEADERSHIP
LIVING TO TELL THE STORY OF OVERCOMING
FROM HERD IMMUNITY TO HERD MENTALITY
THE SPEED FEAT OF SCIENCE
COVID CHEFS ARE THRIVING


Drug of Desperation
As hospitals find their stockpiles depleted, distraught relatives are forced to look for purported Covid medicines

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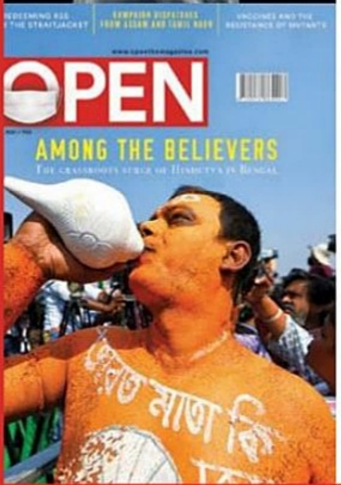
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THE PRAGMATIC GLOBALIST

The internationalism of a confident nationalist

By KANWAL SIBAL

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden at the White House, September 24

A COUNTRY'S FOREIGN POLICY flows from its geography, who its neighbours are, how it defines its interests, the need to adapt to the changing international environment to safeguard core interests, the influence of outside powers in the region, the global order in which it has to conduct itself, its economic situation, its political and military capacities, its historical experience, cultural moorings and the image it has of itself. Its system of governance, the thinking of its elites and the general public sentiment also influence foreign policy. Decisions taken at one time in presumed self-interest and later proved mistaken become difficult legacy issues that constrain choices.

To assess Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy all these complex factors have to be taken into consideration and a judgement made. No prime minister makes foreign policy on a clean slate. They can redefine to some extent the national interest in the light of international developments, adapt to those, change priorities to some extent, explore new opportunities and partnerships, give more attention to areas and issues viewed as hitherto relatively neglected, show more boldness and imagination and infuse the country's foreign policy to a degree with the leader's confidence and self-assurance.

All countries give priority to relations with neighbours so as to build a cordon of friendly countries, prevent them from being used by external powers to create tensions and pressures, and to avoid getting bogged down in firefighting in its periphery and get distracted from pursuing larger regional and international goals. Modi too emphasised the Neighbourhood First policy when

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he became prime minister in 2014, inviting all the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his inauguration and, later during his premiership, visiting more than once the neighbouring countries, including an informal visit to Pakistan as a personal gesture to then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. His predecessors had failed to make bilateral visits to countries in our immediate neighbourhood, a glaring anomaly. Modi's visit to Nepal in August 2014 was the first bilateral visit to that country by an Indian prime minister in 17 years. His visit to Sri Lanka in 2015 was also the first standalone visit after 28 years.

One can ask whether this heightened attention has yielded expected results. To answer that question it is important to recognise that no country can fully control its immediate environment. This is true even of powerful states such as the US, Russia and China. In our case, for various reasons our neighbours have been difficult to handle. Our dominating size creates fears that lead them to assert overly their independence and sovereignty, draw in external powers to create a balance with India, and seek to affirm their separate identity viewed as being threatened by shared civilisational, cultural and ethnic bonds.

Nepal and Sri Lanka have played the China card against us openly in the past and even now. Despite efforts to woo Nepal to counter the mounting Chinese influence there, India's relations with it remain problematic. The Modi Government has been criticised for obstructing the flow of goods into Nepal during the Madheshi agitation in the Terai against Nepal's new constitution, but despite goodwill efforts thereafter to put ties back on track, internal instability in Nepal and the Maoist elements there have impeded the process. The Maldives too had played the Chinese card in a show of great animosity towards India until the ouster of its previous government. India has rightly courted the new government with generosity. Bangladesh has used this card too though today our relations with it under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are probably the best ever. Transit links through Bangladesh to India's Northeast have been developed despite the acute political sensitivity of the issue for Bangladesh in the past. India is supplying power to Bangladesh. It has offered a credit line for defence purchases from India. While the Modi Government has solved the enclaves issue and settled the maritime boundary, the Teesta river issue remains unresolved. Illegal migration from Bangladesh and its linkage to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act became issues of great controversy with a negative fallout in Bangladesh, which is true also of the Rohingya issue, but both were handled well enough eventually. With all these neighbours the Modi Government has been very active in seeking improvement in ties, realising that while it cannot exclude China from pursuing its interests in these countries, it needs to step up its own efforts there. The political and economic consequences of China's expansionist policies are being felt in these countries, which requires us to be alert and lay down certain red lines, as we have done in the case of Chinese submarines docking at the Colombo port. The wait-and-watch attitude has paid off in the Maldives, containing for the moment the pursuit by China of its maritime strategy there that threatens our security interests. Meanwhile, India has rightly been generous in its assistance to the Maldives.

Modi has contributed to building strong bonds with the US, without compromising our larger foreign policy interests and autonomy. His visit to the US has also turned out to be reasonably successful

THE PAKISTAN PROBLEM has endured ever since Independence and no Indian prime minister has found a solution to it. Modi has raised the stakes for Pakistan on the terrorism front by authorising our armed forces to conduct retaliatory ground and aerial operations across the Line of Control (LoC), as was the case with the surgical strikes in 2016 in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir after the Uri terrorist attack and the 2019 Balakot attack on Pakistani territory proper after the Pulwama terrorist attack. In every possible forum, be it in joint statements with various countries, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), UN General Assembly and so on, India has put the spotlight on the terrorism issue. It has kept the heat on Pakistan at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). More importantly, it has taken a bold political decision in the context of domestic politics and international opinion as well by abrogating Article 370, making Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) a Union Territory and separating Ladakh from it. These fundamental constitutional changes mean a ruling out of any role of Pakistan in resolving issues pertaining to J&K, which can no longer be on the agenda of any future India-Pakistan dialogue as a separate item. Apart from Pakistan's diplomatic belligerence on the issue, and China rejecting the new map of J&K issued by India and seeking to raise the issue in the UN Security Council (UNSC) with no effect, the Modi Government has been successful in managing the international fallout of the decision.

With regard to China, India's focus since the 1990s has been on peace and tranquility and confidence-building measures on the unsettled border in order to avoid military clashes. China cannot be wished away, and so the policy so far has been to continue discussing the border issue but not allow a lack of resolution to stand in the way of broadening ties in economic and other areas. Modi has initially not only continued this well-established policy but, as part of his more personalised diplomacy, raised the level of political engagement by having two long-ranging informal summits with President Xi Jinping. These summits allowed a probing of the mind and worldview of the top leader of a country that

Modi has changed the image of India from an obstructive participant in climate change negotiations to one of leadership without giving up on basic principles of climate justice, and provision of finance and technology

has an opaque system of decisionmaking and governance. The net result has been disappointing as China has continued its provocations on the border. India has countered China's expansionism in Bhutan's Doklam plateau and in Ladakh with determination. China has been able to get its way in its aggressive policies in the South China Sea without resistance and has bullied Japan in the East China Sea without a military confrontation, but India has stood up to it. At the same time, Modi has kept himself away from public denunciations of China and has kept the negotiation option open with some success so far. The idea is to avoid the relationship from becoming politically irretrievable, pursue a policy of both resisting and engaging China as other countries are doing, preserving our room for manoeuvre internationally so that we do not become overdependent on others in countering China and become a pawn in their hands, besides being able to participate in forums where both countries are present such as RIC (Russia-India-China), BRICS, SCO, etcetera. This has not precluded India from opposing Xi's pet project, the Belt and Road Initiative, and taking steps to curb China's economic inroads in India in sensitive areas.

India's relationship with the US has been expanding ever since the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008. Under Modi the momentum of these ties has been maintained. Trade and investment volumes have expanded, and so have defence ties. India signed the remaining two defence foundational agreements with the US, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (2016) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (2020). India has been declared a Major Defence Partner of the US (2016), transfers of sensitive technologies have been eased, a 2+2 Defence and Foreign Ministers dialogue has been instituted. Modi has shown his capacity to forge a degree of personal chemistry with US presidents as different as Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Some needling trade issues have remained unresolved, with the US withdrawing arbitrarily benefits to India under the Generalized System of Preferences. If cooperation on counter-terrorism increased during Modi's tenure, the US policy towards Pakistan has ignored some vital Indian concerns, such as in Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement with the Taliban, legitimising the terrorist militia politically, and the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan have created serious security issues for us. Pakistan has been effectively rewarded with its long-sought "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. The US pinpricks on human rights issues, religious freedom, restrictions on NGOs, etcetera have continued. The US sanctions on Iran have interfered in India-Iran energy ties and have damaged our strategic ties with that country. The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) legislation seeks to hit at our defence ties with Russia. The power disparity between India and the US and the latter's unilateralist tendencies explain some of these issues. On the whole, Modi has contributed to building strong bonds with the US, without compromising the country's larger foreign policy interests and autonomy. Modi's visit to the US has also turned out to be reasonably successful in its outcome, removing some concerns about the degree of commitment of the Biden administration to relations with India. The positive trajectory of India-US ties remains confirmed.

The US debacle in Afghanistan is a failure of US policy, not of Indian policy. The US has gone against all its declared principles and values in handing over the country to the Taliban, giving a fillip to religious radicalism and terrorism in the region. Criticism in some quarters that India had erred in Afghanistan by not reaching out to what was projected as a reformed Taliban has proved to be wrong. The Taliban government is neither inclusive nor has it emerged through negotiations, as Modi has pointed out. He has expressed concern about Afghan territory being used as a base for terrorism—a concern that has been reflected in the joint statement issued on the occasion of Modi's US visit—and has cautioned against any early recognition and so on. On this, the US visit has not provided clarity about the American position though the joint statement exhorts the Taliban government to honour its commitments to human rights, especially those of women and minorities. Using its UNSC membership, India has got inserted in the UNSC resolution a reference to the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in the context of the Afghan soil being used for terrorist acts against countries in the region. India was right to close its consulates and the mission in Afghanistan in view of the security situation. Any loss of life or a hostage situation would have put the Government in the dock. The purported loss of $3 billion of investment in development projects in Afghanistan is misplaced criticism, as the roads, the power lines, the dam and the parliament building continue to exist and these development projects (500 in all) have earned the goodwill of the Afghan people that will endure.

Ties with Russia have been preserved despite India's perceived leaning towards the US. India has succeeded in de-hyphenating its Russian and American ties. India has shown its commitment to its strategic ties with Russia by going ahead with the S-400 missile procurement despite the threat of US sanctions. In the standoff between India and China in Ladakh, Russia responded positively to India's demands for emergency defence supplies despite receiving signals from China to slow them down. The energy ties with Russia have expanded. Modi and President Vladimir Putin maintain regular contact. Russia made a remarkable personal gesture to Modi by participating in the UNSC meeting presided over by him. No doubt, on Afghanistan and Pakistan, India and Russia have divergent thinking, but this should not be exaggerated. On these countries, India has in reality much greater differences with the US.

The deepening of India's strategic ties with France has been a marked feature of India's relations with Europe during Modi's tenure, despite the misguided controversy generated domestically by the opposition over the Rafale contract. The warmth of ties with Portugal has been helpful in conducting the India-EU summit and the decision to begin negotiations on the long-pending India-EU free-trade and investment agreements. India under Modi has demonstrated its rising diplomatic stature with the organisation of an India-Nordic summit in 2018. The Modi Government resolved the vexatious Italian marines case to put India-Italy relations back on course. The Enhanced Trade Partnership and the 10-year roadmap to expand ties with the UK are joint efforts to take advantage of opportunities created by Brexit.

When India talks of multipolarity today it is on the assumption that India has the capacity to be one of the poles. By stating that a multipolar world presupposes a multipolar Asia, India is signalling its resistance to China's ambition to dominate Asia

India's relations with the Gulf countries began improving under the previous Government but the Modi Government has notably consolidated them, especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with which cooperation in combating terrorism has been taken to new levels. The Pakistan connection of these countries is no longer an impediment in bilateral relations. The previous Indian external affairs minister was even invited to address the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) Foreign Ministers meeting in Abu Dhabi in 2019. Modi has been conferred the highest awards of these two countries. Defence ties with the Gulf countries are on the agenda. The Indian Army chief has visited both the countries for the first time. That a BJP prime minister, projected as anti-Muslim, with all the abuse he receives from Pakistan, is a privileged interlocutor of the conservative Gulf monarchies marks not just a big change in the mindset of these countries but also the practical and pragmatic approach of the Modi Government with a clear eye for national interest. Regrettably, even though Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was invited to India in 2017 as part of efforts to reach out to an influential country in West Asian politics, relations with Turkey have received a setback with Erdoğan's uncalled-for statements on Kashmir which he has treated as a Muslim cause, prompted by his Muslim Brotherhood affiliations. The Modi Government has reinforced ties with Israel without disturbing its ties with Arab countries; in retrospect, India was ahead of the curve in the light of the normalisation of ties among some Gulf monarchies as well as Morocco's with Israel.

With Iran, despite draconian US sanctions on the country that disrupted our economic and energy ties with it, India has kept communications channels with the leadership open as part of the exercise of its strategic autonomy. Modi visited Iran in 2016 when the Chabahar agreement was signed. The US was persuaded to exclude the project from the sanctions regime and its implementation has been pursued despite difficulties. The Iranian foreign minister visited India in 2020 and India's external affairs minister has visited Iran twice recently and met its leadership after the presidential elections there. The Government has felt that it is in India's interest to maintain some balance in the region in the context of our greatly improved ties with Arab Gulf countries. The Modi Government is concerting with Iran on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

India's Act East policy has seen Modi focusing on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2018, all the 10 ASEAN leaders were chief guests on the occasion of the Republic Day for an India-ASEAN commemorative summit. Modi noted on the occasion that "the East, or the Indo-Pacific region, will be indispensable to India's future and our common destiny". He has paid special attention to Singapore which has acted as a gateway for India to ASEAN. Attention has been paid to Vietnam, which he visited in 2016, following on the Vietnamese prime minister's visit to India in October 2014. He made his first visit to Indonesia in 2018. The joint statement issued on the occasion points to the underlying strategic aims of wooing specific countries in this region, with the two sides emphasising the "importance of achieving a free, open, transparent, rules-based, peaceful, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, where sovereignty and territorial integrity, international law, in particular [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea], freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development and an open, free, fair and mutually beneficial trade and investment system are respected." As part of maritime cooperation, India will develop a strategic port in Sabang in Indonesia, which is close to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. As part of our Act East policy, connectivity projects linking the Northeast to the ASEAN region through Myanmar and Thailand in which Japan is an active partner have been pursued but hiccups have occurred with the agitation in Assam on a new citizenship register and the military coup in Myanmar.

In the maritime area, the Modi Government has been remarkably dynamic diplomatically. India is strategically located in the Indian Ocean and this is being leveraged to assert India's importance and its leadership role at a time when the maritime security scenario in the Indian Ocean is becoming more problematic for India with China's ingress into the region as part of its so-called maritime silk road project. India has taken calibrated steps to give substance to the concept of the Quad countries (the US, India, Japan and Australia) coming together for maritime security. The bilateral India-US Malabar exercise was expanded in stages to include Japan and Australia. The Quad initially met at official level, subsequently at the ministerial level and then on March 12th at the summit level in a virtual format at the initiative of the US president. An in-person meeting held on September 24th in Washington has issued a detailed and substantial communiqué outlining the broad agenda of the Quad covering beyond maritime security, anti-Covid vaccines, climate change, critical technologies, supply chains, infrastructure, space, education, people-to-people contacts, Quad fellowships, and so on.

INDIA HAD INITIALLY tried to separate the Quad from the Indo-Pacific concept, looking at the latter as broader, more inclusive in scope, to be adhered by all those countries which accepted the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight, openness, a rules-based order, respect for sovereignty and equality and so on. This was the thrust of Modi's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018. India's Indo-Pacific concept is represented by the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine that would ensure prosperity for all the stakeholders in the region. India has rightly emphasised "ASEAN centrality" in the context of the Indo-Pacific. As ASEAN countries are a link between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, they have played a central role so far in building an Asian security architecture through mechanisms such as the East Asian Summit. It is imperative therefore to assure the ASEAN countries that their role is not being diluted, as also to draw into a Quad-plus architecture in the future key ASEAN countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam in particular. The Quad communiqué underlines the centrality of ASEAN.

As part of a much stronger emphasis on maritime issues, the Modi Government has increased cooperation with key countries, especially France, with a focus in particular on the southwestern Indian Ocean. A logistics agreement has been signed with France. In the area of maritime domain awareness a fusion information centre has been established by the Indian Navy at Gurugram. A trilateral India-Sri Lanka-Maldives meeting on maritime security held in November 2020, which was attended by observers from Bangladesh, Mauritius and the Seychelles, marks a more dynamic approach by the Modi Government on Indian Ocean security in the background of the mounting Chinese challenge. In November 2019, Modi launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative at the Bangkok East Asia Summit to foster a rules-based order in the region.

Africa has continued to receive focused attention. In 2015 the third India-Africa Summit was organised with 54 countries attending, 41 at the level of heads of state or government. In 2018 he visited Rwanda and Uganda. In his address to the Ugandan parliament he enunciated with clarity the 10 principles that guide India's policy towards Africa. In 2016 he visited Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Mozambique. Barring Uganda, all these countries are on the eastern seaboard of the Indian Ocean. Modi has also paid special attention to smaller countries as part of creating constituencies for India within the UN system and

Modi addressing the UN General Assembly in New York City, September 25

GETTY IMAGES

to bolster its leadership role. In New York in 2019 he participated in two summits: the first India-Caribbean (CARICOM) summit with 20 leaders with a focus on climate change, the blue economy and India's partnership in their development; and the third Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, the India-Pacific island countries summit, the first such summit having been held in 2014 when he visited Fiji and the second in Jaipur in 2015.

Climate change is an issue with huge strategic and economic importance for a country like India, with one-sixth of the world's population that has to achieve the fruits of development for which increased energy use is indispensable. Modi has changed the image of India from an obstructive participant in climate change negotiations to one of leadership without giving up on basic principles of climate justice, and provision of finance and technology. At the COP26 in November 2021, India will be the only major country to claim that it has met its commitments under the Paris Agreement. With the progress India has made in the area of renewable energy, India has credibility in international negotiations that it lacked before. With France, India launched the International Solar Alliance to promote Modi's vision of "One Sun, One World, One Grid".

AFP

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar in New Delhi, July 28

Modi has tried to use the Indian diaspora, with its wealth of talent and achievements, as a force multiplier for Indian diplomacy as never before. He has galvanised and infused them with confidence about India's future. The massive rallies organised abroad for him to address the Indian communities have been wrongly trivialised as event management. Other countries such as China and Israel have used their diaspora abroad effectively for promoting the interests of their countries of origin. The political significance of these rallies has been recognised by the host countries whose top political leadership has attended these occasions.

The prime minister has also used India's soft power to buttress its foreign policy, be it the UN declaring June 21st the International Yoga Day every year or Modi going to prominent Hindu and Buddhist temples during his official visits abroad, as in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam and Japan. Such visits make the larger point of old civilisational ties between India and these countries and revive consciousness about these bonds. In a speech at the India-China Business Forum in Shanghai in September 2015, Modi drew upon the legacies of Buddhism as a key to uniting Asia, emphasising it as a bond between ancient India and China.

India's ambition to be a leading power requires more engagement with the outside world from a position of self-assurance and self-confidence. Modi's visit to Australia in 2014 was the first one by an Indian prime minister after a gap of 28 years; to Canada in 2015 it was after a gap of 42 years; to Fiji in 2014 after a gap of 33 years. His visit to Mongolia was the first ever visit by an Indian prime minister. He is the only prime minister to have visited all the five countries of Central Asia, a little more than a year after assuming office. Modi consistently sends out a message of a vibrant India that offers opportunities to the rest of the world. When India talks of multipolarity today it is on the assumption that India has the capacity to be one of the poles. By stating that a multipolar world presupposes a multipolar Asia, India is signalling its resistance to China's ambition to dominate Asia. India wants to be in a position to be friendly with all countries, even those which have adversarial relations with each other. This enables India to align itself in a pragmatic way with diverse countries based on shared interests. As part of India's leadership role, India's vaccine diplomacy has earned it goodwill.

Regrettably, challenges for India's foreign policy have been created by domestic opposition to Modi and the BJP-led Government. On issues such as the standoff with China in Doklam or Chinese intrusions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, the abrogation of Article 370, the strikes against Pakistan, the weakening of institutions, restrictions on freedoms, human rights in J&K, the treatment of Indian minorities, the farmers agitation, political, civil society, academic and media lobbies in India have vilified the prime minister personally, questioned the credibility of the Government and even sought external intervention in our internal affairs. Ammunition has been given by these lobbies to the Western liberal press to besmirch the image of India under the Modi Government. India has had to expend its energies to counter this propaganda abroad by elements in India itself against the health of India's democracy. The domestic consensus on India's foreign policy has got frayed. ■

Kanwal Sibal is a former foreign secretary

A MATTER OF POLITICAL WILL

Aggression, attitude and actionable intelligence

By NITIN A GOKHALE

INDIA IS ON THE cusp of a major transformation. Next year, on August 15th, independent India will turn 75. In the lifespan of nations, India is still young. Much has been achieved, but more needs to be done, particularly in the field of national security. As India's national security challenges are becoming increasingly complex in view of the rapidly changing global geopolitical scenario, the country needs a solid strategy for the transformation to a muscular new India.

There is no denying that India is faced with a complex security environment which is greatly influenced by global and regional dynamics, with internal and external security challenges getting intertwined in many aspects. The major threats include Pakistan, China, the Pakistan-China nexus, porous borders, migration, cross-border terrorism, cyber-attacks, narcotics, arms smuggling, human trafficking, insurgencies and militancy in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, as well as left-wing extremism (LWE) across the length and breadth of the country, all of which are live threats.

Non-traditional security issues, too, are becoming bigger by the day. Dealing with these requires special skills and approaches. India needs to build its resilience to mitigate the impact of non-traditional security issues. The Covid-19 pandemic is a larger national security concern that has had a major impact on India's security. It has become a bigger strategic issue in the path of India's post-Covid economic recovery. The unprecedented health crisis caused a steep fall in India's GDP during 2020-21. The Indian armed forces were deeply involved in relief and rescue measures.

The rebalancing of power equations, the rise of China, the deepening of the Russia-West chasm, instability in India's neighbourhood, the weakening of globalisation and the pandemic leading to rupturing of supply chains, the relentless march of technology, the reckless destruction of biodiversity, the erosion of nuclear deterrence, invention of new weapons, and attacks on critical infrastructure through cyber means are all factors which impact India's security. India needs to continuously deal with a mix of traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

In the neighbourhood, China's footprint has expanded to India's disadvantage. China's well-controlled initiative and its offshoot, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are destabilising for India. Since Independence, India's pursuit of peace never guaranteed the avoidance of conflicts. Today, however, India's progressive rise along with its growing capabilities enables it to play a crucial role in the complex subcontinental domain and beyond. India has embarked on policy initiatives like Digital India, Make in India, Skill India, Smart Policing, as well as policy directives like Act East, etcetera. While doing so, the Government has ensured a greater strategic autonomy for India and a position as a net security provider for the region. If there is a single factor that could negate or retard this, it is the growing threats and internal bottlenecks evolving internally which restrain our ability to securely govern ourselves.

Security governance is one such aspect that ensures the safety and security of people. While ensuring the safety and security of citizens, it is a prerequisite for any government to uphold the rule of law by managing change with order and ensuring the legitimacy of power as a critical component of governance. Should it fail to happen again, history will once more lament that we couldn't do what we should have done.

For decades after Independence, we remained behind the global curve in addressing our issues, bereft of political identities. These limitations ensured that we remained embroiled in conflict management instead of pursuing conflict resolution in most internal security challenges. As political intent, the focus on addressing security as a vital prerequisite to development was indicated in 2014 when an internal security specialist was brought in as National Security Advisor (NSA). Mandated to execute a behavioural modification towards security as a state function, the tests started in July 2016 when unrest flared up after security forces killed Burhan Wani, a Kashmiri cyber warrior pretending to be a commander, and dozens died in the rioting that followed. In early January 2016, eight soldiers were killed fending off an assault on the Pathankot airbase, and in mid-September 2016, 23 more died in the Uri attack. The answer through surgical strikes was the first display of political resolve after years of indecisiveness in dealing firmly with threats, both internal and external.

India's successes in the foreign policy and defence domains have been in the limelight over the past three or four years but the improved internal security situation and handling of the varied challenges across the country have largely gone unnoticed.

PIB

It has to be noted that except the episodic ups and downs in Kashmir and some Maoist-affected areas, the rest of India has remained free of big terrorist attacks that periodically used to shake the country. In Jammu and Kashmir, the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 has altered the situation completely.

Terrorist violence in Kashmir has declined significantly since August 2019 owing to better control of the overall security situation in the region. Since January this year, security forces have killed over 100 terrorists, including more than a dozen top commanders belonging to various militant groups operating in the Valley. The Valley witnessed fewer terrorist encounters in 2021 compared to 163 in 2019 and 213 in 2018. In 2020, 244 terror incidents were reported in which 221 terrorists were killed. The killing of civilians in terror-related incidents and deaths of security personnel have also come down in the same period.

However, in the most surprising development of all, ceasefire violations came to a grinding halt in the Valley. All of a sudden, in a dramatic turn of events, violence on the borders stopped after February 25th, 2021, when India and Pakistan renewed the 2003 ceasefire agreement, bringing relief to the affected population along the border. The sharp decline in ceasefire violations helped calm the rising military tensions between the two countries.

At the same time, people felt some semblance of safety too, as Kashmir Valley witnessed an over 72 per cent drop in law and order cases. According to the Jammu and Kashmir administration, from August 2017 to July 2019, there were 1,394 law and order incidents in which four security personnel and 27 civilians were killed. The number of incidents declined to 382 from August 2019 to July 2021 in which no lives were lost.

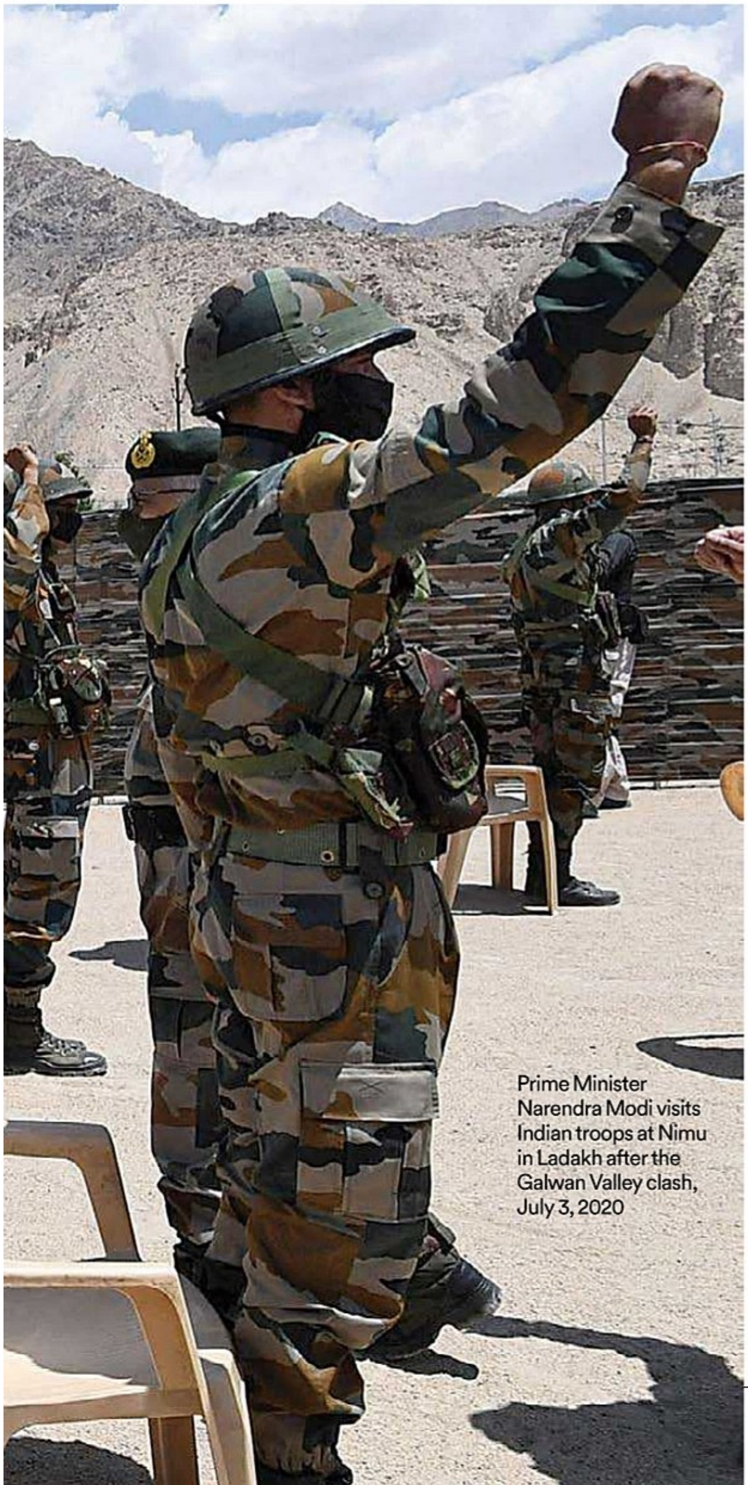
INCIDENTS OF STONE-pelting have also fallen to nought. There are almost zero stone-throwing incidents and business is back to normal with the tourism industry looking up. According to Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) data, stone-pelting incidents between January and July witnessed a drop of nearly 88 per cent compared to the same period in 2019.

With a relatively secure environment prevailing in the Valley today, the youth are channelling their energy towards growth-oriented developmental projects instead of falling prey to Pakistan-sponsored radicalisation and terrorism. As the data suggests, the overall trend of terrorism has been on a decline. This vastly improved security situation is attributed to the increase in counter-insurgency operations, tighter borders and the fall in cross-border infiltration along the borders ever since the February agreement. According to the Indian Army, not only has cross-border infiltration come down drastically but local recruitment of terrorists has also gone down.

Security forces and the Union territory administration need to step up their development efforts that may dissuade delinquent Kashmiri youths from joining terrorist ranks. In this regard, the initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to engage with key political leaders of the Valley is significant.

In the Maoist-affected areas, mostly spread over 10 states in central India, episodic setbacks apart, the Government's long-term, two-pronged strategy of securing development and improving security, appears to be succeeding with lower violence levels, higher arrests and elimination of the cadres of the CPI (Maoists).

The Maoists have been steadily pushed into a corner as security forces make incremental gains in different states. Different stakeholders dealing with terrorism have been strengthened through capacity-building and new enabling legislation. Terrorist modules have been neutralised both within and outside



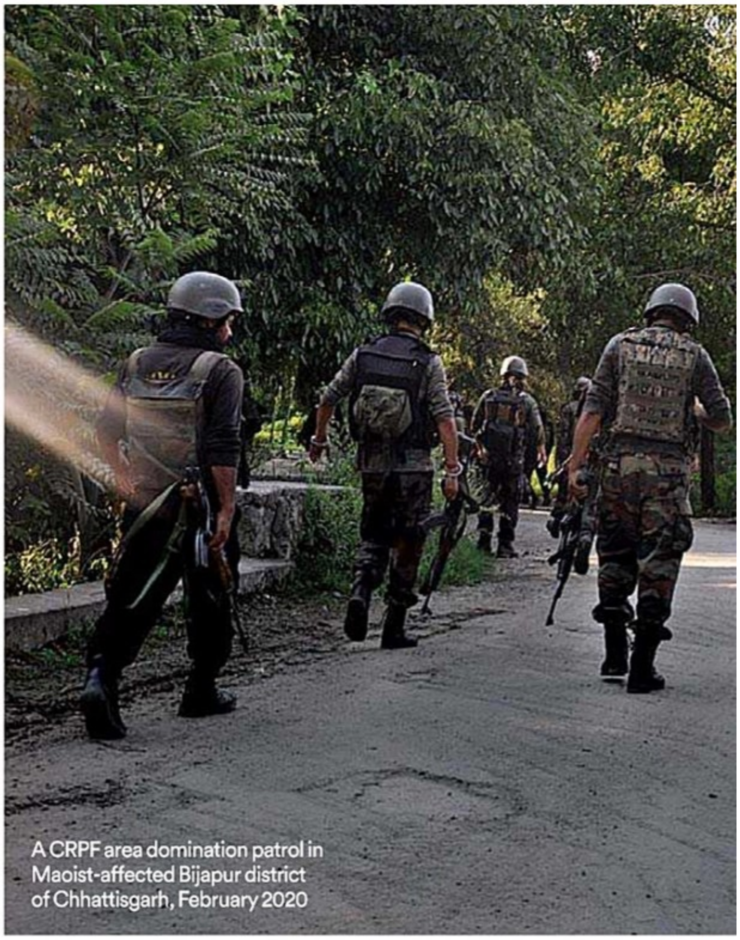
Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits Indian troops at Nimu in Ladakh after the Galwan Valley clash, July 3, 2020 the country. Groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) and Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir have been proscribed. The entire network of the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Indian Mujahideen (IM) has been practically broken. Al Qaeda modules were identified by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in the early stages. Over 30 coastal intelligence posts in coastal areas have been sanctioned. The Government has also ensured justice for the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and provided relief and rehabilitation.

A MULTI-PRONGED CAMPAIGN against LWE was launched through focused ground operations at centres of gravity like the Dandakaranya region in south Chhattisgarh as well as on the ideological front. Intelligence-driven coordination between Central forces and state police forces as well as action against the "Urban Naxals" have progressed simultaneously. A combined security and development-related approach has led to better communication and regional connectivity, electricity, health and education facilities in LWE-affected areas. As a result, there has been a continuous decrease in LWE violence and shrinkage in their spatial spread.

At the same time, the Government has shown a willingness to talk with insurgent groups and address the genuine demands of ethnic groups in the Northeast. This has led to the signing of settlement agreements with several groups, such as the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) in Meghalaya in 2014, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT, Sabir Kumar Debbarma faction) in 2019, Bodo groups in Assam in 2020 and solution of the Bru/Reang issue between the governments of Mizoram and Tripura in January 2020. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958 has been removed from Meghalaya and some districts of Arunachal Pradesh. A framework agreement was signed with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) in August 2015 and, at the time of writing, the stalled process of talks with the Naga groups has been resumed. The Centre has supplemented the Northeast states in capacity-building. Ten additional India Reserve Battalions were sanctioned in March 2018. There is a significant decline in insurgency incidents, security force casualties and civilian deaths.

The security situation in the northeastern states has improved substantially since 2014, says the MHA annual report for 2019-20. It says that in the last six years there has seen a significant decline in insurgency incidents by 70 per cent, casualties of security forces personnel by 78 per cent and civilian deaths by 80 per cent in the region. 2019 recorded the lowest insurgency incidents and casualties among civilians and security forces during the last two decades since 1997. Compared to 2018, insurgency incidents have registered a decline of 12 per cent in 2019. Similarly, there has been a huge reduction of 71 per cent in security forces deaths (2018:14, 2019: 4) and 9 per cent in civilian deaths (2018: 23, 2019: 21) in 2019.

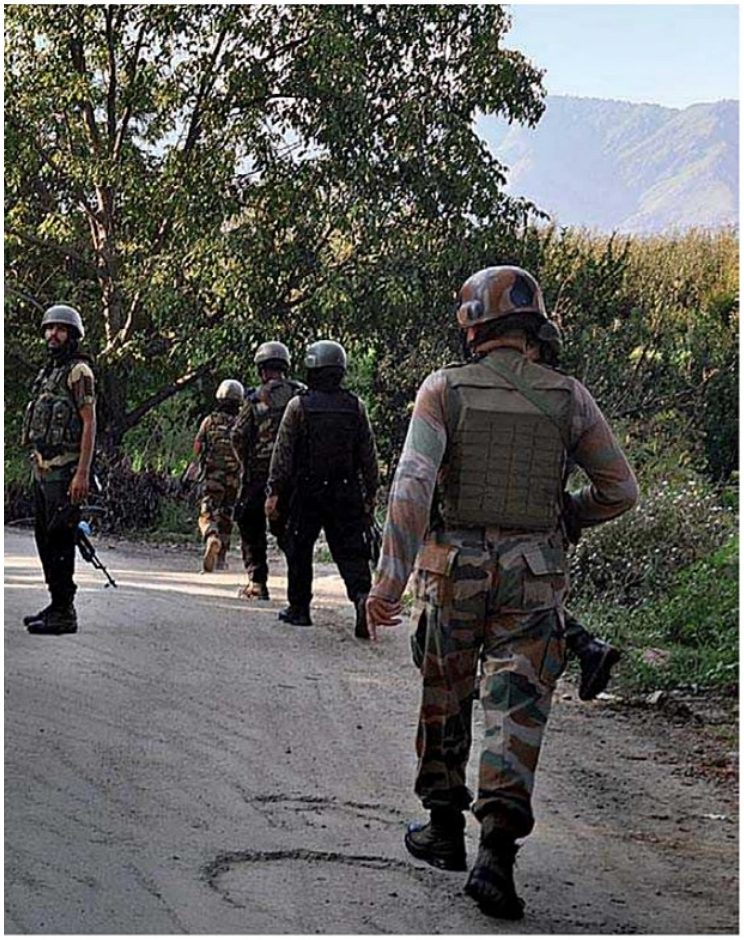
Several pending proposals to recognise the sacrifices of security personnel—civil and military—and raise morale were cleared expeditiously. The setting up of the Police Memorial, National War Memorial and One Rank One Pension were, therefore, accorded top priority.


A CRPF area domination patrol in Maoist-affected Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh, February 2020

In the Modi Government's first term itself, a multi-pronged strategy encapsulated by the word "SAMADHAN" was formulated to tackle the situation in the LWE-affected areas. It was elaborated as follows:

S: Smart Leadership
A: Aggressive Strategy
M: Motivation and Training
A: Actionable Intelligence
D: Dashboard-Based KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and KRAs (Key Result Areas)
H: Harnessing Technology
A: Action Plan for Each Theatre
N: No Access to Financing

Apart from the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs)—Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), Border Security Force (BSF) and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP)—deployed in 10 states affected by LWE, the Centre is lending a strong hand to state governments in combating Maoist insurgency. However, the fight has to be led



by state governments, not just on the security front but also in implementing socio-economic policies meant for people's welfare.

For years, successive governments had identified the lack of roads in remote and distant underdeveloped areas of LWE-affected states. So by July 31st, 2017, under the Road Requirement Plan-I (RRP-I), the construction of 4,447 km of roads was completed out of the 5,422 km envisaged in the plan. Building on the success of these plans, the MHA informed a parliamentary committee that a new plan, the Road Connectivity Project for LWE-affected areas (RRP-II), has been approved which envisages the construction of 5,412 km of roads and 126 bridges in 44 districts of LWE-affected states at an estimated cost of ₹11,725 crore. Roads apart, the Government has been pressing state governments to open up job avenues for the local tribal population. One of the ways to create jobs in backward areas is to raise special police battalions exclusively manned by locals. According to the Union home minister, 743 Scheduled Tribes candidates from the four most affected LWE districts of Chhattisgarh—Bijapur, Dantewada, Narayanpur and Sukma—have been recruited in the "Bastariya Battallion" in order to enhance local representation in the security forces. More Kendriya Vidyalayas and Skill Development Centres have also been opened in LWE-affected districts.

As the security forces establish dominance over increasing areas of erstwhile LWE strongholds, efforts towards civil consolidation have also increased. MHA officials say the implementation of the scheme for Fortified Police Stations (FPS), for the construction and strengthening of 400 police stations in 10 LWE-affected states, is now near-completion, with over 350 police stations modernised and fortified.

The other big internal security challenge in India is the ever-present danger of radicalisation, especially among the Muslim youth. Since 2012, the fatal attraction of Daesh the world over (also known as the Islamic State, ISIS or IS) has spread to India. Several youth in the cities and small towns have been lured by the seductive ideology which ISIS propagates. Online radicalisation has been on the rise.

There have been extensive warnings in the media about this new phenomenon since 2014, but in reality, it has not manifested to the extent feared by observers, thanks to preventive arrests and constant vigil of the law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The Daesh threat, while always present, tapered off in India in 2017. Only 132 Daesh operatives from India are known to have had some affiliation with the outfit. This is a relatively small number compared to the inroads made by ISIS in Europe, West Asia and other parts of South Asia, and even Australia. Many of the ISIS operatives turned out to be former members of some terrorist or radical outfit, such as IM and SIMI. Over 70 per cent of these had either been arrested or intercepted before they could travel to Syria or Iraq, which is a testimony in itself to the vigilance of the Indian agencies. Significantly, many of the ISIS' Indian members were radicalised while living and working in the Gulf countries for a prolonged period of time. These are minuscule numbers given that India is home to 175 million Muslims.

However, the threat of ISIS will not disappear in a hurry since many Muslim youths will continue to nurse real and imagined grievances against the Indian state. Law enforcers have done a commendable job so far to keep the threat under check, but they will have to be on guard to ensure that the danger of ISIS spreading its wings in India under some other garb is minimised.

Significantly, the Government informed Rajya Sabha on March 9th, 2016 that Central and state agencies had arrested 46 Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agents between 2013 and 2016. Furthermore, according to partial data compiled by *satp.org*, at least 159 ISI modules have been neutralised across the country between 2004 and April 24th, 2016, indicating Pakistan's sustained efforts at subversion and destabilisation.

Overall, the last few years have proved that security policy-making is a function of defining objectives, building capacities and showing the political will to deploy capabilities to achieve identified goals. The leadership style, personal beliefs and past experiences of the prime minister also play an important role in framing strong and effective national security policies. Once policies are made, what matters most is how the leadership reacts to crises as well as its ability to execute plans. ■

Nitin A Gokhale is a national security analyst, author and media entrepreneur

REDEFINI

Narendra Modi performs *bhoomi puja* for the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, August 5, 2020

NG INDIA

An open civilisation rejecting old monolithic constructs

By ABHINAV PRAKASH SINGH

OCTOBER 7TH MARKS THE DAY Prime Minister Narendra Modi completed 20 years as the head of a government. It includes his transformative 13 years as the chief minister of Gujarat and seven illustrative years as the incumbent prime minister. These two decades have seen the transformation of India as a nation and as a civilisation. Modi is both a symbol of and the driving force behind the emergence of New India, which is more rooted and confident in its civilisational antiquity and futuristic in its vision.

The Republic of India emerged from a turbulent period of repeated waves of invasion, settler colonialism and imperialism. The indigenous resurgence started before the British period during the Maratha century when the rule of foreign dynasties was rolled back on large parts of the Indian subcontinent. The British conquest of India violently disrupted this resurgence. It is often discounted how brutal British rule was and how violently they conquered and subjugated India. Two centuries of British rule in India were two centuries of hunger and famine and two centuries of armed uprisings by the masses every decade. Following the sacrifices made by countless revolutionaries and freedom fighters, the spectre of the Indian National Army and the naval uprising of 1946, the British rule finally ended. But then imperialism is not just about the physical subjugation of a country. It is also about cultural, social, institutional and knowledge aspects of the society and the polity.

British rule formally ended in 1947, but the Raj continued to linger and even thrived among the remnants of the colonial elite and order. The old agrarian relations instituted under British rule survived the uneven tenancy reforms. Flawed economic policies ensured that India failed to industrialise and urbanise, stifling the key driver of economic and social change. The political alliance of the English-speaking urban elites and feudal elements in the countryside blunted the promise of the Constitution and democracy for the majority. Life went on listless for the vast majority of the people as before, full of deprivation, poverty and lack of socioeconomic mobility.

The core task of the postcolonial Indian state should have been the rejuvenation of the Indian nation and the renaissance of Indian civilisation. And the key to this task was the rapid socioeconomic transformation on the back of industrialisation and modernisation. The economic uplift of the masses and social emancipation after centuries of foreign dominance was the historical task of the state. But instead, we deluded ourselves into chasing alien constructs of the secular-socialist paradigm. The state and government became a vehicle for perpetuating the old elite rule and patronage to the cultural commissars tasked with whitewashing history and creating an alternate reality to "re-engineer" society into their imagined ideal state. The result was decades of economic stagnation, social unrest and a worsening strategic and security environment.

The democratic upsurge in the anti-Emergency movement and later economic reforms provided a respite from a seemingly endless dystopia presided over by Congress the hegemon.

Economic reforms proved to be a pivotal moment in India's history. It put India on a new trajectory of growth to which the National Democratic Alliance Government gave a further fillip under the prime ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It disturbed the diurnal certainties of life and caused a churning, continuing from which a New India is finally emerging. Millions of people, especially the marginalised communities, fled the villages with their social and political bondages to the burgeoning urban centres in one of the greatest migrations in human history. It was both an act of desperation and an act of liberation. A new class of people emerged from smaller cities and towns that were neither part of the old landed agrarian elite nor the bureaucratic and political patronage system of what is derisively called Lutyens' Delhi. It was this class that distrusted the old elite and yearned for change in the political guard. These middle and neomiddle classes became part of the democratic uprising that in 2014 swept aside the old political certainties and cold arithmetic of opportunistic caste and communal calculation. Narendra Modi had won the largest democratic mandate in human history. A feat he would repeat in 2019.

So, what does the rise of Narendra Modi symbolise?

Economic transformation, democratic deepening, social assertion, rejuvenation of the Indian nation and renaissance of the Indian civilisation. He is both a product of the churn and an architect of New India. He has been a relentless moderniser in his entire tenure, first as chief minister and then prime minister. He has emphasised economic growth by embracing the markets and consigned the old *samajwadi* obsession to the dustbin of history, where it rightly belongs. By championing entrepreneurship, reinstating profit as a legitimate goal, and celebrating businesses and industry, he has caused a shift in the political culture of India in favour of economic growth and prosperity.

The debate has shifted from removing poverty to creating prosperity. The opposition may mock his plank of *vikas* but is forced to talk about development and claim that it can deliver better than Modi. Modi has embarked on an arduous path of accelerating the modernisation of the Indian economy, the Indian state and Indian institutions. Over the last year, he has enacted the biggest set of economic reforms ever, touching every sector of the economy from agriculture to manufacturing to labour laws to tax laws. And unlike the 1991 reforms under duress, these reforms are born of conviction. His push for digital India, universal access to digital public goods and digital sovereignty is guided by a vision of the future. He has pushed the unified legal and administrative structures, such as the Goods and Services Tax, "One Nation, One Ration Card", etcetera, which seek to strengthen the Indian state and modernise its apparatus for the 21st century by empowering the people.

Modi at the Badrinath temple in Uttarakhand, May 2019

Where mocking and targeting temples was once common, the ascendance of *shakti-upasak* Prime Minister Narendra Modi has compelled the deracinated secular leaders to do a temple run. The cultural, spiritual and civilisational essence of Bharat is being reclaimed one brick at a time

Modi has laid great emphasis on infrastructure development. Road and highway construction are at an all-time high; the railways are getting modernised; Bullet Trains are being introduced and reaching hitherto untouched corners, especially in the frontier regions. Waterways are being revived, and air connectivity is expanding like never before. Why is all this important? We often forget that infrastructure is one of the key factors that have driven nationalism and civilisational consciousness. When the Sui dynasty built the Grand Canal, north and south China were brought into closer cultural and social embrace. The Roman roads were transmitters of the Roman civilisation and Roman identity in the farflung areas of the empire. Railways and highways in the modern period reduced distance, spurred migration and enabled economic integration, thus playing an important role in the rise of the modern nation. The rapid expansion of infrastructure is leading to the rise of an even stronger common Indian identity where the difference between local and national is getting blurred with each kilometre added to the expressway or new tracks laid in the Northeast. Modi is redefining what it means to be an Indian simply by enabling more and more Indians to fly for the first time through policies such as the Udan Yojana.

VS Naipaul rightly called India a "wounded civilization". Repeated invasions and colonisation by various Central Asian tribes dislocated society and brought wanton destruction upon the sacred sites. Such has been the scale of destruction that hardly any temple structure older than 200 years can be found in north India. Even after Independence, these historical wrongs were not corrected, barring in exceptional cases such as the Somnath temple in Gujarat. Nor was any serious attempt made to repair and reconstruct the sacred sites to restore them to their former glory. Everywhere one went, there were temples in ruins or occupied by alien structures. Most of the temples and sacred sites that were operational were in a dilapidated state. Prime Minister Modi is the first ruler after Shrimant Ahilyabai Holkar to build, repair and renovate temples on such a large scale. Several famous temples in Ayodhya, including *ghat*s of Saryu, were rebuilt by the sage queen. And today, after 500 years, the Ram Temple is reborn. Kedarnath and Kashi Vishwanath are being renovated for the new era. Where mocking and targeting temples was once common, the ascendance of *shakti-upasak* Prime Minister Modi has compelled the deracinated secular leaders to do a temple run. Sacred cities and places such as Varanasi and Vindhyanchal are undergoing transformation. And with these, the cultural, spiritual and civilisational essence of Bharat is being reclaimed one brick at a time.

One of the core issues in the rejuvenation and renaissance of India has been a fractured society with deep faultlines running across caste lines and persistence of discrimination and marginalisation. Economic modernisation and industrialisation pursued by Modi weaken the boundaries of caste and undermine the structure that sustains the caste system. But it is not sufficient, and conscious efforts in the realms of society, government and polity are equally important. It is important to remember that Modi started his activism in the Sangh Parivar, which, rooted in Hindutva, inherited the legacies of the Hindu proto-modernity of the early modern period and contemporary social and religious reform movements to imagine a modern nation. Rising above the distinctions of caste and community has been one of the core concerns of the Sangh Parivar. It is the worldview reflected in the policies and working of Prime Minister Modi. He has launched massive welfare schemes for the poor and the marginalised communities. From free housing to free healthcare to free gas cylinders, his schemes are the wildest dreams of doctrinaire leftists in Western countries such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. But unlike the old guard, Modi is known for ensuring successful implementation of these schemes. But most importantly, he has based these schemes on objective criteria. Caste operates on the ground by excluding weaker castes from access to state resources and schemes. India has failed to achieve even basic education and healthcare because the implementation of these policies was mediated through local power structures that invariably depended on old social structures. It meant that most of the benefits were captured by dominant caste leaders. It is here that Modi has acted as a disruptor par excellence.

He has not only ensured public provision of private goods to the poor but made these either universal or dependent on a clearly defined criterion such as the Socio-Economic Caste Census, 2011. And by doing so, he has undermined the old patronage model of politics where a person would benefit if her caste supported the party in power. The old patronage model created a "politics of unfreedom" for the weaker castes, especially the non-dominant Other Backward Classes and Dalit castes, who are now free of the tutelage of the dominant castes in accessing government schemes and benefits. It is no surprise that they have rallied behind the prime minister and his party, which has undermined old caste politics that thrived on promoting the widening of the social divide. This new model of bringing people together and welding them into a united political bloc without appealing to base caste instincts was always critical in healing the social divide and laying the foundation of a stronger national and civilisational rejuvenation.

Social inclusion and representation without factious competitive caste politics is the new paradigm ushered in by Modi. This new paradigm was visible when as chief minister of Gujarat, he started a training programme for priests from Dalit castes. It was visible when he formed the most inclusive and representative council of ministers ever in India. There can be no restoration of pride in the Indian spiritual traditions and civilisational narrative unless social equality and harmony are at the cornerstone of the futuristic vision of India. And under Modi, we have seen that vision in action and not just the usual political rhetoric of the past.

In the "Idea of India" of the old elite, the identity of India was defined in opposition to British imperialism. It was an identity supposedly born of the struggle against British rule, which was ascribed to one party and family in the version of the court historian patronised by successive Congress governments. The role of thousands of revolutionaries and the contribution of various castes and communities were sidelined. We were told that unless we believe that India owes its existence to the anti-British struggle led by Congress and pledge our allegiance to its monolithic view of India, the existence of India will come under threat. But as successive generations of Indians moved away from the direct experience of the anti-British struggle, they found it more and more difficult to relate to this arcane "Idea of India", not the least because it was an artificial construct that didn't gel with the social and civilisational memories of the society. Disenchantment with the narrative of India created the void which was being filled by far-left ideas and wokeness flowing from the liberal arts departments of American universities.

THE RISE OF Modi has corrected this anomaly by firmly rooting the identity of India in its civilisational history. India is not merely a postcolonial state. India is not merely a modern nation supposedly created in the process of anti-British struggle. India is the world's oldest living civilisation. And at present most of the geographically contiguous parts of this civilization are united under a single polity, and this political unification derives its justification from a shared civilisational heritage. This older, grander sense of *Bharatvarsha* has been revived in the popular imagination by Prime Minister Modi. It is reflected in his speeches, in his symbolism and in his action. When in his speech at the UN General Assembly, he asserts that India is the mother of democracy, he is invoking the ancient republics of *Bharatvarsha*, religious *sangha*s, village councils and various spiritual traditions that advocated and practiced democratic, collective decisionmaking with social and gender representation. When he becomes the first prime minister to visit the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, he affirms that the"Idea of India" is much older than the modern history of the anti-British struggle. When he takes foreign dignitaries to the *ghat*s of Varanasi, he is mainstreaming the antiquity of India that is Bharat into the international relations and strategic discourse.

Under Modi, India is reclaiming its natural identity as an open, plural civilisation by rejecting the old monolithic constructs seeking to impose a manufactured version of history and identity. He has refocused the Indian state on its historical task of the rejuvenation and renaissance of the Indian nation and civilisation by accelerating economic transformation, infrastructure development and social inclusion. As an administrator, he has proven himself to be the great moderniser who seeks to propel India into the future by equipping it with a modern state apparatus and legal framework for the 21st century. As a politician, he has swept aside the timidity and apologia that the Indian political class felt when owning its identity and practising its traditions. What we see before us is the architect of New India and the rise of a civilisational state. ■

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THE BOSS WHO LISTENS

Experts are never out of place in his court

By ULLEKH NP

EVER SINCE HE decided early in his first term at the Centre to assess his ministers' performance the way the corporate sector evaluates its employees, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's style of governance has been in the spotlight. Much before that, while he was chief minister of Gujarat, two noted economists who studied his policy priorities had described them collectively as the Gujarat model which, they said, was a metaphor for a primarily growth and private entrepreneurship-driven development.

While it appears outwardly that Modi has been busy assessing the performance of his team of politicians, bureaucrats and experts, it is he who is often at the centrestage and whose work often gets reviewed endlessly, by those who adore him and those who detest him with equal vigour. As a result, there are multiple interpretations and perceptions about his modus operandi in government, engendering a haze of speculation and myth. After all, he is the first prime minister after a long time who has been through such intense public scrutiny. Sanjeev Sanyal, Principal Economic Adviser in the Ministry of Finance, tells *Open* that the biggest misconception about Modi as an administrator is that he is authoritarian, which is a familiar refrain among his political rivals. On the other hand, states Sanyal, "The prime minister is a very attentive listener. That is what I can say from my experience. He is very open to feedback, especially negative feedback."

Which primarily means Modi wants to first know the

Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds a review meeting after his aerial survey of areas affected by *Cyclone Tauktae*, May 19

truth, however unpleasant it is. Good news can wait, but not the bad ones.

Several officials, who have worked closely with the Vadnagar, Gujarat-born political heavyweight while he is prime minister and as chief minister prior to that, attest to that assertion. Arvind Gupta, co-founder and head, Digital India Foundation, and former CEO of MyGov, notes that for Modi, when he was chief minister and later prime minister, e-governance has been close to his heart. "Although he had ambitious targets in mind, I have never even once seen him being impatient at any meeting. Besides, he makes sure that opinions of everybody there are heard. He also has great respect for hard work and talent. He rewards them both," Gupta declares.

Gupta goes on to say that Modi is also an "avid note taker" when he meets the experts. As someone who has a quick grasp of technology, he comes to meetings very well-prepared, Gupta quips, adding that the prime minister is always fully aware of the discussions in earlier meetings. He generally speaks last, recalls Gupta, emphasising the prime minister has for long been a champion of e-governance and he has a knack for keeping himself abreast of global trends. MyGov is a citizen-centric platform launched in 2014 to seamlessly link the people with the Government.

That Modi is a tireless listener is a compliment he gets from most professionals in his dispensation.

Krishnamurthy Subramanian, Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) to the Government of India, discloses that on a tour abroad when his protocol officer happened to be the official food tester to the prime minister, the officer revealed to him that what they say about Modi and his strict lifestyle is true: he sleeps only four hours, maintains a hectic schedule and takes his exercise regimen seriously.

However, for Subramanian, the first thing that always strikes him about the prime minister is a quality often spoken about within closed circles around Modi, but not much outside: that he is an intense listener.

The 49-year-old economist is an alumnus of prestigious institutions, and has worked at multinational companies and interacted with scores of Nobel laureates and other luminaries for whom listening is second nature. "Still, I haven't met a better listener than the prime minister so far. He never shows any impatience, nor interrupts. His body language is extremely calm when you speak to him on various subjects," says Subramanian, an alumnus of IIT Kanpur, IIM Calcutta and the University of Chicago where he was a doctoral student of former Reserve Bank Governor Raghuram Rajan. A professor at the Indian School of Business, Subramanian had previously worked with JPMorgan Chase, TCS and at Emory University.

Another trait of Modi that Subramanian finds endearing—something Sanyal also talks about—is the prime minister's insistence on knowing the truth as early as possible in an interaction. Says Subramanian: "He strongly encourages me to speak my mind. And I genuinely speak my mind, and this is contrary to the general perception that some people have about him. He doesn't want to know just the good news."

In the process, even a world-class professional like the CEA walks out of a meeting with Prime Minister Modi deeply inspired to perform better. Subramanian sees that as a confirmation of the prime minister's superior leadership skills. He is also delighted when Modi stays rooted and humble, asking for clarification when needed. "He asks us to explain when he doesn't understand something well," Subramanian says.

THE PRIME MINISTER, it is learnt, often gets into one-on-one meetings with specialists for hours to become thorough on various subjects so that he can acquire a greater understanding of them ahead of framing policies. "Such is the rigour of the man," says a Delhi-based official. The prime minister also remembers to praise officials and politicians who deserve a pat on their back for their hard work and exceptional skills. "He gives everyone their due," notes another IAS officer from the Gujarat cadre.

For his part, Subramanian also remembers an occasion in circa 2017, before he took over as CEA, when he was part of a pre-Budget consultation organised by NITI Aayog. He made a presentation on the financial sector and after he was through, he was meditative for a while. Then his eyes wandered and finally met those of the prime minister's. He found that the prime minister was waiting to catch his attention to convey his appreciation. As soon as the prime minister's eyes caught his, he communicated through his eyes. "I really felt very inspired that the prime minister of the country pays so much attention," recalls Subramanian.

People who have worked with him for years, especially since his early days as chief minister of Gujarat, say that Modi is always ready to act based on feedback, a practice he is known for. He is also an intense listener

People who have worked with him for years, from his early days as chief minister of Gujarat, point out that Modi is always ready to act based on feedback, a practice he is known for. An official says that it is possible he has picked up the habit from his early days as a politician and a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *pracharak*.

Take, for instance, the drone policy of this year. The original version was amended after comments from the industry and various stakeholders. The policy that was finally cleared made operating a drone in India easier. It got rid of security clearance for licence issuance, and fees were drastically brought down. On August 26th, the prime minister tweeted: "The new Drone Rules will tremendously help start-ups and our youth working in this sector. It will open up new possibilities for innovation & business. It will help leverage India's strengths in innovation, technology & engineering to make India a drone hub."

Meanwhile, in a nation that elected him after 10 years of Congress rule and then re-elected him for another term and that wants results very soon, Modi's efforts to centralise governance around the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) have secured plaudits for all the right reasons. It is felt that the centralised structure of the Modi Government enables rapid implementation of projects, drafting of policies and overall decision-making while decentralised governance as seen earlier in the years between 2004 and 2014 was beset with policy paralysis. Again, an official who has watched him for decades, says, "His style of working is to take responsibility and accountability for his actions and to make things happen very fast. He is a true moderniser, but at the same time, he delegates work and demands accountability from his ministerial colleagues too. So, in the end, it is a centralised structure where there is a collective effort to achieve the best possible results. Modi in that sense is a leader of the people and a good manager of men and women. He also works at a feverish pace without showing any signs of exhaustion."

Modi's efforts to thrash out solutions to pressing problems in an emerging economy like India with the help of experts have won praise from various quarters, including those who are not politically on the same page. None other than Nassim Nicholas Taleb, an essayist who wears many caps, including a risk analyst who studies probability, had praised Modi's response to quickly enforce a lockdown last year, saying that it was a black swan event and in the absence of much knowledge about what was in store, it was the best thing to do. A black swan, according to *Investopedia*, is an unpredictable event beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences. Similarly, Cass Sunstein, Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard Law School, and a former Administrator, White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, had praised India early last year on a range of aspects notwithstanding his well-known ideological positions. He tweeted early last year after reviewing the Indian situation: "Some exceptionally impressive achievements in India, on issues including cleanliness, public health, safety, and sex equality."

For someone who as chief minister used to get his staff to collect bad news from Gujarati newspapers (for instance, a roof collapse of a classroom in a distant village or an absence of doctors in a public health facility) and then press his officials into action to get remedial measures in place, Narendra Modi has a great understanding of both "micro and macro pictures", says a Gujarat cadre IAS officer who adds that hard work and an appetite for learning have put "Modi in good stead". In these trying times, as the world tackles a contagion and economic crises, such qualities have helped the prime minister cope with newer challenges. ■

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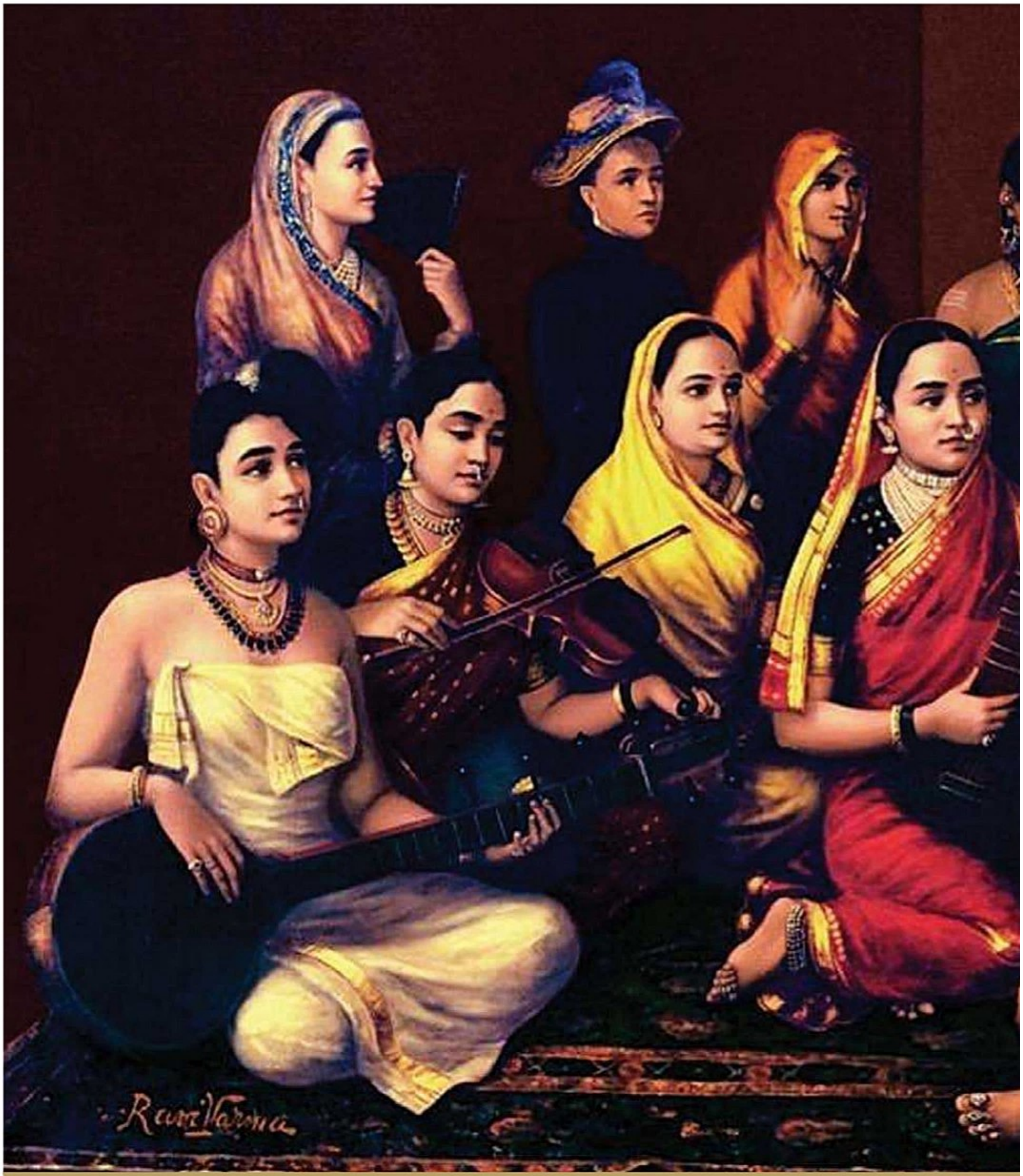
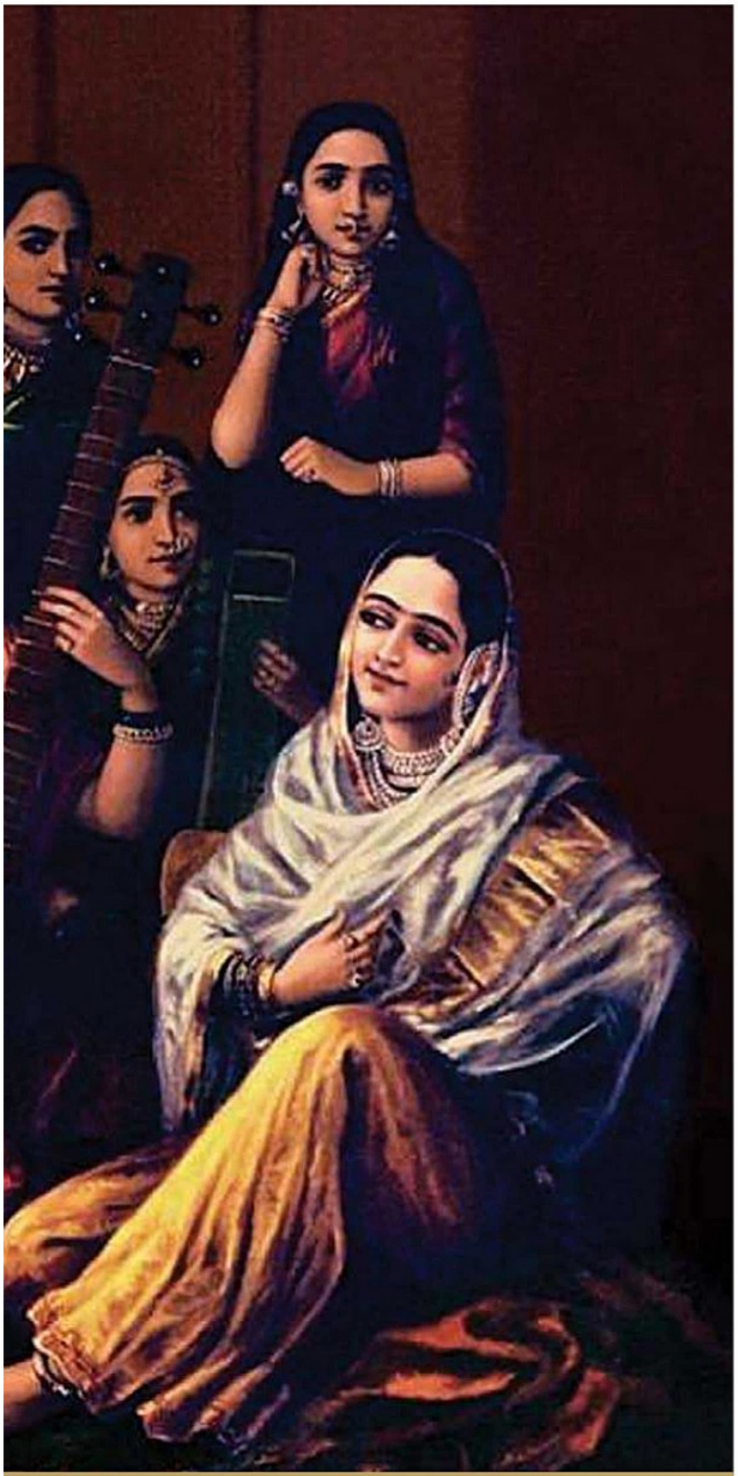
THE QUIET PATRIOT



IN HIS GALAXY OF MUSICIANS (1889), BY FEATURING WOMEN FROM ACROSS
CONVEYED THAT THOUGH ALL DIFFERENT, THEY YET BELONGED ON A

ISM OF RAVI VARMA



THE SUBCONTINENT, RAVI VARMA SINGLE CANVAS

Funded by maharajahs, admired by moderates while also welcoming the extremist vision, in his domain, the artist manifested a nationalism of his own

By Manu S Pillai

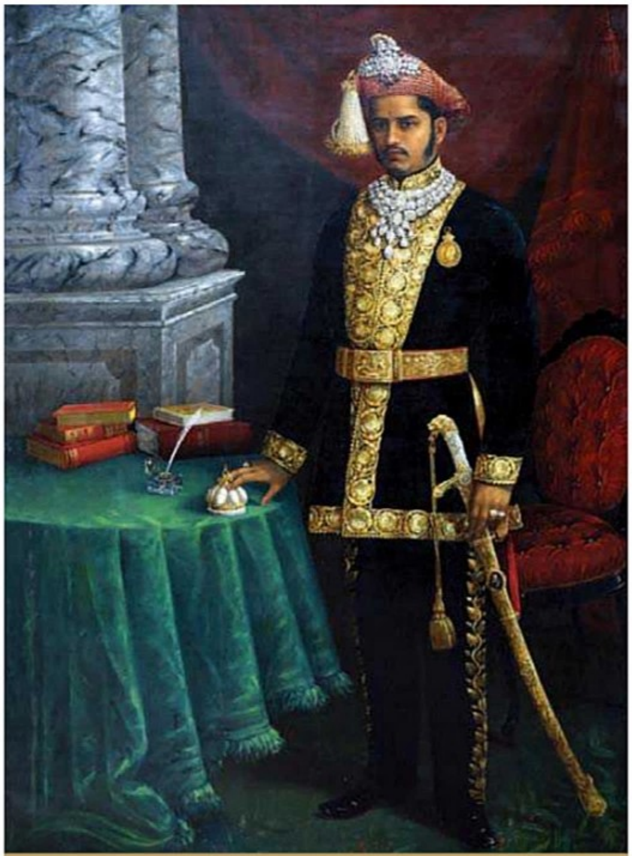
IN 1906, WHEN Ravi Varma was back at his ancestral home, working on a final commission from Mysore, his diabetes took a turn for the worse. A carbuncle appeared on his body but the surgical operation that followed led to complications: at two o'clock on 2 October, the artist passed away. He was already by then no longer up to the mark emotionally. As his obituary in *The Hindu* reported, 'By his brother's untimely death [in 1905], Mr Ravi Varma sustained a heavy and irreparable loss', from which he 'never wholly recovered'. So too in a letter written in the same phase, Ravi Varma revealed his vulnerability when he termed himself a *paapi* (sinner). Besides, as with most human beings, life had brought its disappointments: if he saved his father's family from financial ruin, he also failed to prevent his older son from going astray. He had succeeded as feudal head of the Kilimanoor clan, but there were private debts to pay. His granddaughters were princesses, but his marriage had been a turbulent affair. Indeed, another regret was also that though he had painted the who's who of the day, he had not thought to do a portrait of his own mother before her death. And now, just short of sixty, the artist's story came to a sudden end. He might have been consoled to know that his passing was widely lamented: as a former governor of Madras wrote, 'When I think I would not see Ravi Varma in this world anymore, my heart is filled with sorrow.'

Ironically, however, soon after his demise, Ravi Varma's legacy was challenged—the man held to be 'unrivalled among Indian Artists' was by 1911 coolly dismissed as 'a once famous native artist'. The reasons were largely political. This was a time when nationalism was acquiring a more forthright tone; in the age of *swadeshi*, anything foreign was suspicious. Ravi Varma may have painted Hindu gods and scenes, but his use of a Western style meant he was no longer worthy of esteem. He was accused of participating in an 'orgy of foreignism' and had apparently 'swallowed with open mouth' un-Indian inspirations. Aurobindo proclaimed him the 'grand debaser of Indian taste'. Sister Nivedita decried Ravi Varma's Shakuntala, who, to her, was wholly 'ill-bred': 'Every home,' she cried, 'contains a picture of a fat young woman lying full length on the floor writing a letter on a lotus leaf. Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* 'in her homespun sari' as a 'virgin mother rather than a temptress', she argued, conveyed a more respectable ideal. The critic, Ananda Coomaraswamy, meanwhile, decided that Ravi Varma was not just 'vulgar' but 'ten thousand times more so than Raphael'. His art was 'not national art' and while he had had an opportunity to inspire a pan-Indian aesthetic, he had regrettably missed the bus.

Viewed in isolation, the artist's fall appears dramatic. But the fact is that it was a generational affair. As we saw earlier, Madhava Rao and Seshiah Sastri too—for all their achievements and reputation—fared poorly in the eyes of their younger countrymen. At one time they were icons, but as colonialism was delegitimized, the fact that they had worked within its rules saw them consigned to the proverbial dustbin. Indeed, older Congressmen too were paid in the same coin—men who, like the native statesmen of the day, advocated moderation and saw little contradiction between nationalism and pledging allegiance to the queen. Indeed, much of the stigma comes precisely from the lack of vigour in their tone; from the fact that they played it safe by shrouding subversion in coy words of loyalism. Their world was, moreover, dominated by elites, with the larger public excluded, and the fact that these early Congressmen showed faith in princes too became jarring. By the mid-twentieth century Nehru, for example, would describe the states as 'sinks of reaction and incompetence' and the '[o]ffspring of the British power in India, suckled by imperialism'. To his peers, the compact their predecessors forged with the maharajahs was embarrassing. But as BR Nanda observes, the fury this generation faced is explained by the 'conscious superiority and almost contempt with which each generation tends to judge its predecessor'. After all, there are those today who feel Nehru was deracinated and not in tune with India's cultural realities.

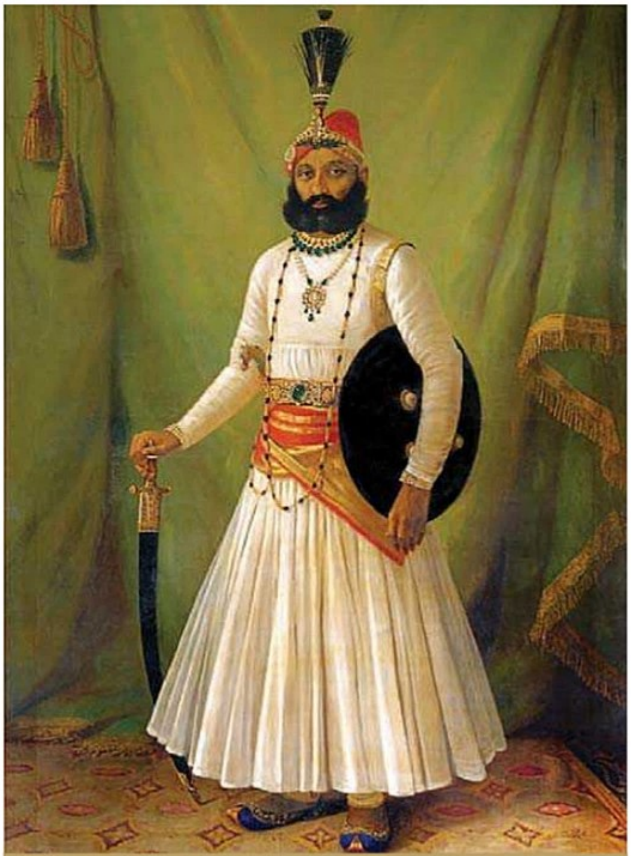
But as always, viewed in context, much of what Ravi Varma's generation did—and in the way they did it—makes sense. Perhaps this can be put in perspective by studying the Congress itself. For instance, the early nationalists' conciliatory language towards the Raj is easily explained. Many Congress founders were born before 1857. Wounds from the Great Rebellion were too fresh for revolt to hold appeal. So also mass awakening, premised on the existence of an overarching Indian identity, in their day was at a discount. People still thought of themselves as Banias and Brahmins, Marathas and Mewaris, and through prisms emphasizing difference, not oneness. A peasant in Gorakhpur had little contact with or knowledge of peasant life in Malabar, let alone the capacity to march together for change. Nationalism was not a given—it had to be slowly constructed. And this was no easy task, even at elite levels. Why, there wasn't even a common mother tongue in which to formulate a political vocabulary: the circular inviting delegates to the first Congress aspired to a 'Native Parliament' and yet required them to be 'well acquainted with the *English* language'. For otherwise there could be no exchange. Even the Congress's nationalism, that is, was for a long time a work in progress—and while its success was limited, its leaders were originators of an important historical process. They may have played by rules set by foreigners, but passive they were not, finding their own creative responses.

Images courtesy: **FALSE ALLIES; INDIA'S MAHARAJAHS IN THE AGE OF RAVI VARMA**



WITHOUT DENYING THAT THERE WERE INDEED PRINCES WHO HAD A DISPROPORTIONATE TASTE FOR LUXURY, GENERALIZATIONS DO NOT SERVE THE STUDY OF HISTORY. SAYAJI RAO II OF BARODA OWNED LIMOUSINES, BUT TO BRAND HIM ANTI-CHANGE IS A FALSEHOOD

The task of the first generation of Indian nationalists was made doubly tough given how critics accentuated every contradiction. When the first seventy-two Congress attendees met in 1885, one paper—studying the bewildering array of complexions and costumes gathered—sniggered that this effort

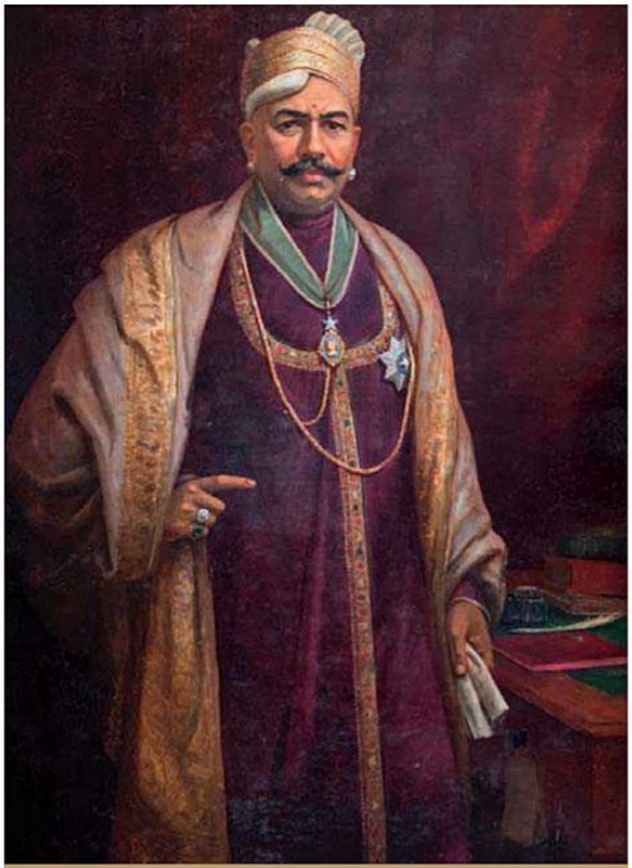


IN MEWAR, WHERE FATEH SINGH DESPISED WESTERN MODES OF GOVERNMENT, HE USED COLONIAL DYNAMICS TO TRY AND AMEND THE STATE'S INTERNAL STRUCTURE BY DIMINISHING HIS VASSALS; 'TRADITIONAL' MEWAR TOO WAS NO UNCHANGING PLACE

at national integration resembled an evening of fancy dress. The very thesis that Indians, divided by caste, religion, food and even bathing styles, constituted a nation was a newfangled position. So uphill was the nationalist task, in fact, that as late as 1903 an 'Indian' cricket team failed to materialize because nobody could agree as to how many social groups in what proportion might claim that label. Besides, enough Indians were anti-Congress. One north Indian critic, for example, declared it as ruled by eastern Indians, and refused to 'lick the Bengali shoes'. The *Times of India* lampooned the party as a 'suburban literary society at whose meetings a number of earnest people read elaborate essays'. Nationalists were told they were not representative of India: *real* India lay with the poor. The poor did not ask for democracy—why should men in coats seek it? The United Indian Patriotic Association claimed the Congress wanted 'misrule and anarchy'. Amusingly, the nationalists were derided for their moderation even then: 'Those who wish to dictate how India shall be governed, ought to talk at the head of an army.' If they could not marshal troops, they had better keep spines flexible.

IN OTHER WORDS, even creating a limited anglicized nationalism was a formidable task. There was no pre-existing national energy that could be harnessed: it had to be carved out, developed and nourished through an elite consensus. This too was why early Congressmen empathized with the princes and borrowed their technique of couching anti-colonial feelings in flowery language. They could not afford to be shut down: singing 'God Save the Queen' screened them from charges of disloyalty while granting access to political principles borrowed from British democracy. Indeed, at the first Congress, delegates went out of their way to proclaim loyalty: 'Had it not been for English education and Western civilisation,' one declared, 'persons inhabiting different parts of this vast country … could not have this day met together.' A fellow participant agreed that a 'desire to be governed according to the ideas of Government prevalent in Europe was in no way incompatible' with 'thorough loyalty' to the Raj. All they wished was that 'the people' should have their 'legitimate share' of power. While this choice of tone made later Congressmen recoil, contemporary critics saw through what the nationalists were doing. As one remarked, 'the speeches of the agitators abound in loyal protestations' and 'cheers for the Queen-Empress'. 'But the whole thing is obviously forced and artificial.' Which then raises the question: if we can sympathize with the moderation of the early Congress, might we also extend that courtesy to contemporary princes and their ministers?

Solidarity, in fact, came easily to brown royalty and early progressives under colonial authority, for both had incentives in smashing imperial claims about native incapacity for government: the princes to deter interference and educated Indians to win power. For all its supposed sins—the glorifying of princes who would eventually get on the wrong side of the nationalist cause, and the dominance of an anglicized class—*at that time* when options were fewer, and nationalism was an elite coalition, these figures made a profound difference. To diminish that phase omits how, if nothing else, they built the intellectual foundations upon which taller efforts could be imagined. It is, in other words, easy to criticize the output by subsequent preoccupations. Only when viewed in context can each be understood in the right perspective. That Congressmen like Gokhale and Ranade served the colonial state in official capacities does not diminish their patriotism. So too that the maharajah of Mysore did not join street agitation, but inspired Indians by showcasing bold industrial experiments is a valid part of anti-colonial resistance. Madhava Rao may have been cautious about upsetting the British regime, but he demonstrated admirably that a capacity for governing well had



MADHAVA RAO MAY HAVE BEEN CAUTIOUS ABOUT UPSETTING THE BRITISH REGIME, BUT HE DEMONSTRATED ADMIRABLY THAT A CAPACITY FOR GOVERNING WELL HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE COLOUR OF ONE'S SKIN

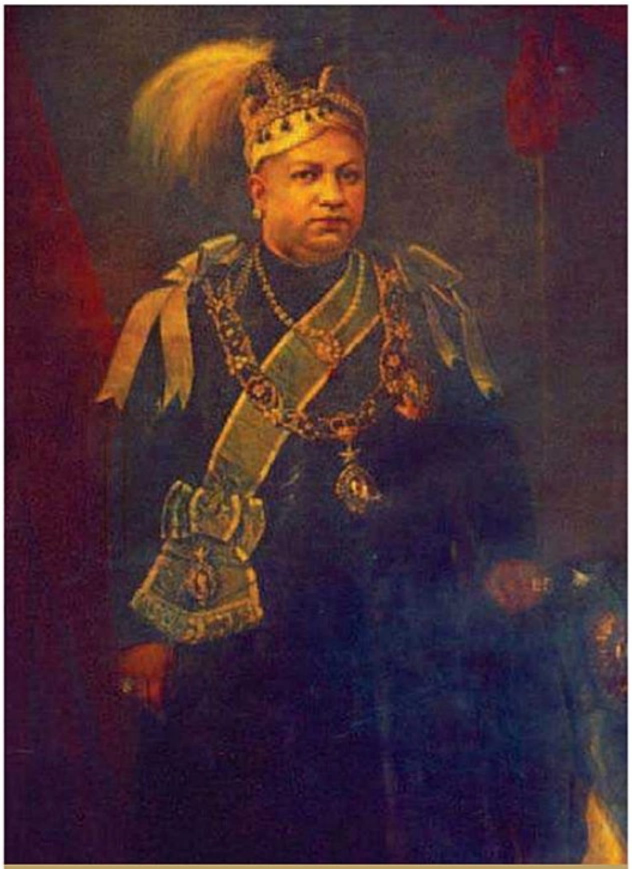
nothing to do with the colour of one's skin. Against what, for example, a Gandhi achieved later, these may seem like small victories. But it was, arguably, the coming together of several such small streams that later allowed nationalism to grow into a great and powerful force, capable of breaking the empire.

There was also another reason why both the early Congressmen and those in princely territory worked within the Raj's conceptual frame. While colonial injustice was real, it had critics even on the British side. In 1853 an India Reform Society was founded in London, criticizing Company rule. John Bruce Norton's analysis of the Great Rebellion of 1857 excoriated his countrymen: 'We have governed too much for ourselves, too little for the people,' he argued, simply 'to extract revenue'. Lord Ripon, the liberal viceroy, advocated Indian participation in administration, believing this essential for the moral and political justification of the empire. Many of his efforts, were thwarted, but Indian regard showed itself in the thousands of people who lined the roads to bid him farewell. Even in the year of the Congress's founding, the journalist William Digby published his *India for Indians* in which he called on the British public to demand better treatment for the queen's Eastern subjects. Given all this—the existence of British voices in favour, the toughness of even constructing a common ground among native elites—Indian politicians and thinkers of the age were quite willing to give the politics of negotiation a chance. Besides, by engaging with the Raj, they were also able to expose the Raj; by mastering its terms, they were able to highlight British hypocrisy too.

Of course, it was only natural that moderate methods would lose their utility with time; that political maturity would require new strategies. The early nationalists, like the native statesmen who served princes, hoped the Raj would live up to its declared ideals. Instead, they received insincerity and betrayal. It was no wonder, then, that the mood began to shift. By the dawn of the twentieth century the queen died and was replaced by Edward VII; British promises were proved largely noise; and Curzon, even as he feuded with princes, held an open ambition to 'assist' Congress to its 'demise'. An angrier band of nationalists appeared, led by BG Tilak's cry of 'Militancy—not mendicancy'. There was no disagreement on goals: it was the means that provoked differences. For years 'we have been shouting ourselves hoarse', Tilak argued, 'but our shouting has no more affected the Government than the sound of a gnat'. While more energetic, this approach did not lead to transformation: Indian society's divisive nature, for example, meant a Tilak had little appeal outside his core Marathi zone. If the moderates had been too rational in their patriotic scheme, the extremist dependence on emotion in a culturally diverse country also had limits. It was only the rise of Gandhi that bridged the gap. By now, however, the princes were becoming enemies, and the moderates a minority.

INTERESTINGLY, RAVI VARMA'S death in 1906 coincided with this change in nationalist winds—the next year the Congress split between moderates and the so-called extremists. The artist himself had cultivated contacts with both sides. In the 1890s, thus, Ravi Varma requested Gokhale to use his influence *within* the system for pushing legislative business dear to creative professionals like him, while helping burnish his rival Tilak's image by printing popular lithograph portraits of the man. Tilak was impressed by Ravi Varma's portrayal of the Maratha hero Chhatrapati Shivaji, in whose name he launched an annual festival for mass galvanization. Through his affordable prints, as is well acknowledged now, Ravi Varma created a visual imagery for India's masses across divides of region and language. He even 'presented his goddesses ... to convey their pan-national identity'. In an age when costume was linked to caste, he depicted Lakshmi, for example, in a 'sari [that] did not belong to any particular region'. Instead, it was in a style that surmounted provincial limitations. 'At a time that India was seeking its national identity,' writes Rupika Chawla, 'this was a very powerful message replete with patriotic significance.' So too in his *Galaxy of Musicians* (1889), by featuring women from across the subcontinent, Ravi Varma conveyed that though all different, they yet belonged on a single canvas. Funded by maharajahs, admired by moderates while also welcoming the extremist vision, in his domain Ravi Varma manifested a quiet patriotism of his own.

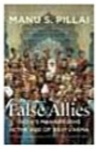
The odium the man later attracted—for being seduced by a foreign style at the expense of the native and 'authentic'—is also unkind. Nationalist fervour explains this, but objectively, what Ravi Varma attempted was quite natural. After all, art in India has been nourished by myriad influences, responding constantly to external stimulation. One of the great examples of Deccan art, for instance, features the Hindu goddess Sarasvati in a Persianate style. Done by Farukh Husain in the seventeenth century, it features the Hindu iconography associated conventionally with the goddess: a peacock, a veena, a lotus and a conch. And yet it reinvents her, projecting Sarasvati not in any consciously 'authentic' Hindu style, but in an Islamicate setting, marrying two traditions. So too in the Vijayanagara empire, sculpture, mural paintings and architectural styles welcomed innovation from across the land, and even overseas from Persia. The painters of Tanjore in the early-nineteenth century were inspired not only by indigenous schools but also by European practices. Viewed by these precedents, then, Ravi Varma's love of oil painting, realism and its application to indigenous subjects sat in harmony with 'tradition'. In drawing from European masters to recreate Puranic scenes, in combining his exposure to Kathakali with a Western technique and in using the camera to plot poses and frames, Ravi Varma was not renouncing Indian art but opening a new path.



AYILYAM TIRUNAL OF TRAVANCORE WAS RAVI VARMA'S FIRST MAJOR PATRON. HE WAS NERVOUS ABOUT CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION, BUT HIMSELF PROVED ITS CATALYST THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLITICAL REFORMS

Like their favourite artist, however, his patrons—the princes—too were unfairly dismissed. If at all discussed, they are usually treated in a negative light or reduced to cliché. Indeed, a 2021 book repeats the trope that India's maharajahs were 'resistant to political and cultural change, except in its more gimcrack and superficial forms, such as French jewellery or Rolls Royce cars'. Without denying that there were indeed princes who had a disproportionate taste for luxury, generalizations like this do not serve the study of history. Sayaji Rao II of Baroda owned limousines, but to brand him anti-change is a falsehood. Ayilyam Tirunal in Travancore was nervous about cultural transformation, but himself proved its catalyst through administrative and political reforms. Men like Rao and Sastri did not toil in multiple states to keep them 'traditional' in some stereotypical sense: they were hired precisely to help those principalities negotiate change, despite Raj-imposed political limitations. Even in Mewar, where Fateh Singh despised Western modes of government, he used colonial dynamics to try and amend the state's internal structure by diminishing his vassals; 'traditional' Mewar too was no unchanging place. Besides, the idea that loving jewellery and cars was solely an Indian princely preoccupation is disingenuous: Western history has its share of luxury-loving spendthrift rulers, and its dynasties too have their share of scandal and intrigue.

One hopes, then, we can look at India's princes a *little* more seriously. They were not unchanging relics of some ancient past, out of place in modern India's evolution: they were part of the process themselves, even if, ultimately, they lost out. Their states were not old-fashioned islands where time stood still and society decayed: they had their own politics and internal dynamics, which are also part of this country's tale. ■



This is an edited excerpt from False Allies: India's Maharajahs in the Age of Ravi Varma *by Manu Pillai (Juggernaut; 568 pages; ₹899)*

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

SIDHARTHA MALLYA
HEMA MALINI
RINZING DENZONGPA

Opening Wide

With cinema halls opening up in Maharashtra by October-end, Bollywood's long drought at the box office looks all set to end. Producers have already announced release dates for long-pending movies, but the question is will audiences return to watch content that was effectively made at least two years ago? Audience tastes have changed over the past 18 months to embrace global and regional entertainment. So, not only will Mumbai movies now have to cater to a more exacting audience, but also contend with Hollywood and southern cinema. If there are any achievements from the lockdown, they are these: audiences are ready to pay for good content, and it can be from anywhere. Yet, nothing in its arsenal so far shows that Mumbai cinema has changed. *Sooryavanshi*, the first of the big films to release, features cars, helicopters, Akshay Kumar and Ajay Devgn in Rohit Shetty's police universe. Films like *Bunty aur Babli2* and *Shamshera* will bank heavily on nostalgia for the original *Bunty aur Babli* and the 1970s dacoit movies, respectively. And Salman Khan's *Antim: The Final Truth* will rely on his equity. So, has the industry learnt any lessons in humility and in scaling down? The short answer is no. Stars are still charging enormous amounts, subjects are still largely based in urban areas (take Karan Johar's *Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani* and Farhan Akhtar's all-girl road movie *Jee Le Zaraa*), and the focus is still on putting projects together rather than getting good scripts made. The streaming universe is vastly different because of the tight creative control exercised by the OTT services, where every script alteration and every acting choice is vetted by the executives. Remember the Mumbai film industry has never changed on its own, it has done so only when pushed either by technology or by economics. This time is not likely to be different.

Actor in Training

For the two years Sidhartha Mallya was in India, handling Royal Challengers Bangalore for his father's company, he was offered several movies thanks to his last name. He's glad now he didn't do them because he was not ready. Instead, after a brief foray into the indie movie scene with *Brahman Naman*, Mallya trained at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in 2016, and then moved to Los Angeles to try his luck as an actor. Now, he spends his time training at the gym, going to acting class and giving auditions. Six months ago, he took another big step, changing his name, registered with the Screen Actors Guild, from Sid Mallya to Sidhartha Mallya as a tribute to his heritage.

So Black Indeed

In *This Life at Play: Memoirs*, a memoir stuffed with incisive observations of the late Girish Karnad and the many worlds he inhabited, one of the most delightful anecdotes deals with Hema Malini virtually proposing to him. Karnad had acted in *Swami* (1977), produced by Jaya Chakravarthy, Hema's mother, and it was rumoured at that time that she was keen on Karnad as her son-in-law not in the least because she was not too enamoured of her daughter becoming Dharmendra's second wife. Karnad recalls how he began to be invited to Hema's house for meals and being met by her brothers. Jaya even started work on a new movie *Ratnadeep* (1979), pairing Karnad with Hema. On the shoot of the film in Khajuraho one day, Hema asked him the all-important question: "The press is saying we are going to get married, How do you feel about the idea?" Karnad writes that he gave her the excuse that he was engaged to someone in the US. (Saraswathy, who eventually became his wife.) But even otherwise it would not have been possible to marry her, he says. Just one reason? When he asked her why she didn't ever act in Tamil films in then Madras, Hema giggled and said: "Oh, the people there are so black."

Did You Know?

Sikkim will soon have its own star son? Rinzing Denzongpa, son of Danny Denzongpa, will be making his debut in the action film *Squad*, directed by Nilesh Sahay, for Zee5. So confident is Sahay of Rinzing that he has already cast him in another action film, *Ronin*. Looks like Tiger Shroff, Rinzing's childhood buddy, will have some competition. ■

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